

CHINA AND THE COUPS: COPING WITH POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

However destabilizing illegitimate regime changes are for Africa, they have not caused China to change its policies. Examining five coups that occurred in Africa between 2003 and 2010, this article argues that China did not see the coups as major threats to its interests, but accepted instability as a part of doing business in Africa. China remained sceptical of democracy as an antidote to instability and deeply distrusted the effort of Western countries to promote liberal political standards. China therefore continued to display conservative self-restraint, a preference for unilateralism, and a pragmatic mercantilist policy intended to strengthen its economic presence. If China is guided by any strategy, it is the strategy of adapting to political realities, rather than trying to shape them.

DURING THE COLD WAR, NOTHING REVEALED the intentions of the great powers in Africa more than the long sequence of mutinies and rebellions. Many of these coups were the outcome of thinly veiled proxy wars or formed a pretext for interference.¹ China's recent emergence as a protagonist in the region sparked a debate about whether it will follow this pattern of bullying and oppression. This article examines China's response to five coups which occurred between 2003 and 2010. It argues that Beijing's posturing was characterized by a strategy of adjustment. China never had a consistent grand strategy for Africa, save one, and that was to adjust pragmatically to changing political situations.

Rather than trying to shape the political context in African countries, China flexibly adapted to regime changes by presenting itself as an

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1 In the 1960s, France suppressed revolts in Mauritania, Gabon, Chad, and Niger, lest these would topple befriended regimes. The Cold War superpowers manipulated armed uprisings to advance their interests in numerous frail states like Angola, Zaire, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. An excellent overview: Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World interventions and the making of our times* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005), pp. 207–50.

indispensable economic partner to whoever was in charge, diversifying its relations across local interest groups, distancing itself from international pressure, and resorting for the execution of its mercantilist policies to a diverse set of actors. What most Westerners perceived as a careless hands-off approach was, in fact, the product of a particular form of realism, which combined an ambitious economic agenda with defensive security calculations that were rooted in Chinese strategic culture.

With research on the Sino-African partnership rapidly developing, this article presents new insights into its political dimension. It examines whether a shift has occurred in the political standards that China promotes on the continent. Originally, Beijing insisted strongly on non-interference and a decoupling of economic interests from political relations, but this position was soon challenged as China became caught in the middle of political turmoil and violence in numerous countries. Students of Sino-African relations concluded that, as a consequence, China could adjust its policies. In the case of the humanitarian tragedy in Darfur, for example, China reluctantly exerted some pressure on the Sudanese government to accept UN peacekeepers.² China's own contribution to UN missions was considered a signal of its growing willingness to engage in political and security affairs.³ Beijing also became involved in a large number of dialogues with Western countries and international organizations on issues like conditionality in development cooperation, the promotion of the rule of law, and good governance.⁴ The five African coups studied in this article provide an opportunity to test whether the political standards in China's Africa policy have indeed started to change, and if political instability in Africa has prompted China to replace conservative sovereigntist attitudes with more liberal or interventionist preferences.

China's evolving attitude towards political instability in other countries also reflects its role as emerging great power and its willingness to cooperate with other countries in a multilateral setting. Scholars and decision makers in the West posited that the People's Republic could be persuaded to become 'a responsible stakeholder'.⁵ This implied that it would cooperate with the European Union and the United States to

2 Jonathan Holslag, 'China's diplomatic victory in Darfur', *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, 54 (2008), pp. 125–40; Dan Large, 'China's Sudan engagement', *China Quarterly* 199 (2009), pp. 610–26.

3 Ian Taylor, *China's New Role in Africa* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 2008), pp. 133–61.

4 Bernt Berger and Uwe Wissenbach, *EU-China-Africa Trilateral Cooperation* (German Development Institute, Bonn, 2007).

5 Former Deputy Secretary of State Bob Zoellick initially proposed making China 'a responsible stakeholder'. Also, John G. Ikenberry, 'The rise of China and the future of the West: can the liberal system survive?' *Foreign Affairs* 87, 1 (2007), pp. 23–37; Alastair I. Johnston, 'Is China a status-quo power', *International Security* 27, 4 (2003), pp. 5–56.

tackle international challenges. Yet, the West was obviously not alone in its effort to influence China's preferences. Political elites in the South, particularly in Africa, often interpreted responsibility in a very different way and expected China to stick to its unilateral policies that revolve around state-to-state partnerships. Furthermore, even within the West there were divergent interpretations of what responsibility actually meant in practice. Whereas European institutions had a penchant for working with regional and international organizations, France and the United States also often operated unilaterally. Hence, the second question is whether and how, amid those different expectations, China has sought to join forces with other countries and international organizations to tackle political instability in Africa.

Finally, this article engages with the discussion about the nature of China's foreign economic policy. A key argument in recent scholarly debates has been that China continued to pursue 'mercantilist' strategies.⁶ It suffices here to summarize the main features of mercantilism: a state that, departing from a highly competitive view of the global economic order, seeks to determine the mode of economic growth and defends national economic interests by political means. So why is it important to evaluate whether or not China is behaving in a mercantilist way in Africa? There are many historical precedents of rising powers trying to expedite their ascent through mercantilism. If China is to follow this trail and consider world economics a matter of competition with other states, this will have important repercussions for its own foreign policy, its willingness to make compromises with African countries, its interaction with other protagonists, and, hence, the future stability of this strategically vital region. Africa is an important case to test whether China is indeed pursuing mercantilism, while the findings could help assess the prospects for the promised win-win partnership with Africa.

Studying China's economic relations with African countries helps clarify complex relations between government and companies. Here we are confronted with an important paradox. Mercantilism would imply that the government actively steers companies' behaviour to expand China's economic influence. Yet, it has also been argued that China is seeking to advance its national economic interests by separating business from politics, hence giving it more manoeuvrability in dealing with

6 For a discussion of mercantilism, see Jonathan Holslag, 'China's new mercantilism in central Africa', *African and Asian Studies* 5, 2 (2006), pp. 133–69. For a historical background: Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, [1776] 2008), Book IV, pp. 275–88. Benjamin Cohen, *International Political Economy* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2008).

various kinds of partner states.⁷ From another angle, it has been posited that the political influence over corporate behaviour is very modest and that China Inc. is mainly following its own agenda.⁸ Again, politically unstable countries in Africa are a particularly interesting case, as the threshold for foreign companies to invest is higher and the insecure conditions challenge the separation between commerce and politics.

China's policies in international affairs can thus be studied from three perspectives. A first approach is to look at China's willingness to shape political realities in African countries and to use diplomatic, economic, or military leverage for defending interests abroad. A second issue is how China considers joining forces and coordinating with other countries, with regional or international organizations being the most important parameter. Third comes the role of the state in China's economic relations with Africa, and how the Chinese government backs its companies overseas.

This article starts with a discussion of China's response to five African coups: in the Central African Republic (2003), in Mauritania (2008), in Guinea (2008), in Madagascar (2009), and in Niger (2010). The subsequent two sections show how China has been driven by economic interests and, even after being confronted with these five cases of political instability, has decided to adhere to its policy of separating business from politics. Evidence was drawn from a wide range of news media, academic writings, and interviews with Chinese decision makers.

China's response to the coups

The Central African Republic (CAR) was the first country where political instability challenged China's interests. China had been rapidly expanding its relations under the regime of Ange-Félix Patassé, with Patassé visiting Beijing in 1999 and a bilateral economic agreement being signed in 2000. The President had gained credit by re-establishing diplomatic ties with Beijing in 1997. What started mainly with aid projects, such as the construction of social dwellings, schools, farming projects, and a sports stadium, steadily diversified into a broader economic partnership. In January 2001, Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan visited Bangui and, in his capacity as President of the UN Security Council, China condemned an abortive military coup attempt in July that year.⁹ Yet, in March 2003, a new rebellion broke out. General François Bozizé, who was also involved

7 For a discussion: Daniel Large, 'China and the contradictions of non-interference in Sudan', *Review of African Political Economy* 35, 115 (2008), pp. 93–106.

8 Bates Gill and James Reilly, 'The tenuous hold of China Inc in Africa', *The Washington Quarterly* 30, 3 (2007), pp. 37–52.

9 Press Release, SC/7107, 17 July 2001.

in the mutiny of 2001, now managed to seize the capital. Just a month after the coup, Vice Foreign Minister Yang Wenchang was dispatched to Bangui to discuss options for maintaining good relations. China approved a budget support grant of US\$2 million to pay the salaries of civil servants, another US\$2.5 million loan was disbursed in June, and a US\$2 million loan in September.¹⁰ Despite the African Union criticizing the coup, Beijing was quick to invite the new head of state for an official visit.¹¹ In the years after the coup, Chinese companies managed to secure major timber concessions and to triple timber exports to the mainland in 2004.¹² In 2007, Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing visited Bozizé, after the latter had been unable to attend the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) because of renewed unrest and violence. ‘The last years of cooperation have been mutually beneficial,’ Li stated, ‘and we have been able to achieve remarkable results.’ New agreements on economic cooperation were signed and China announced the cancellation of the struggling country’s debt.¹³

In Mauritania, too, China was making headway in developing political and economic ties. By 2007, Chinese contractors were active in sanitation, telecommunication, agriculture, and road construction. A Sudanese-Chinese holding hammered out a contract for building a US \$500 million railway. When Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was elected as the new president in 2007, Chinese President Hu Jintao sent a congratulatory message and dispatched a special envoy to attend his inauguration. Then, in August 2008, General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz seized power. Both the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) condemned this move. While Beijing first kept a low profile, its ambassador, after an audience with the junta, confirmed ‘China’s desire to reinforce and improve cooperation’ and remarked that the two countries had maintained excellent relations in spite of ‘changing situations’.¹⁴ In the meantime, Chinese companies strengthened their presence.¹⁵ Telecom giant ZTE concluded a deal with the Mauritanian telecom operator Chinguitel to build a mobile phone network in the country in October 2008. ZTE, which earlier had built up its presence in

10 ‘La Chine accorde 3 milliards de francs CFA à la Centrafrique’, Agence France-Presse (AFP), 23 August 2004.

11 He was invited in June 2004, with the visit following in May 2005.

12 UN Comtrade HS4403, with China as reporter.

13 ‘Rencontre entre le Président centrafricain François Bozizé et le Ministre des Affaires étrangères Li Zhaoxing’, *Xinhua*, 6 June 2007.

14 ‘La Chine s’engage à renforcer sa coopération avec la Mauritanie’, *Xinhua*, 8 January 2009.

15 ‘Zhongguo yu Maota jingmao hezuo gaikuang’ [Overview of the economic and trade cooperation between China and Mauritania], Economic Counsellor Office in Mauritania, 20 June 2010.

various other countries in the region, was introduced by the economic office of the Chinese Embassy in Nouakchott.¹⁶ In January 2009, the government signed a US\$300 million loan agreement to expand the Nouakchott port, 'a flagship of the cooperation between Mauritania and China'.¹⁷ About a year after the coup, Vice-Minister Zhai Jun met with Abdel Aziz. This led to a new economic agreement, a promise to grant concessions to China in the fishery sector, and a deal with Minmetals to exploit newly discovered iron ore deposits. Between 2008 and 2009, exports of iron ore doubled.¹⁸ In 2009, Mauritanian Defence Minister Hamadi Ould Hamadi and the Chinese ambassador, Zhang Xun, signed a memorandum for the donation of military engineering equipment, worth US\$1.5 million.

In Guinea, Chinese companies were literally paving the way for stronger economic relations. Contractors were building roads to the resource-rich heart of the country. The Eximbank financed a large hydro-power project that was needed to keep the mines operational. Chinalco and a company from Henan Province secured licences for exploring bauxite. After having curtailed the position of the American company Alcoa in the bauxite sector and the Australian Rio Tinto in the iron ore branch, mainly as a punishment for insufficient investment in local infrastructure, the government reached out to Chinese investors to fill the gap.¹⁹ In 2008, President Alasane Conté offered Chinalco part of Rio's Simandou iron mine concession. Chinalco declined, lest this would further complicate its relations with Rio, but also convinced that there would be better ways to gain access to Simandou. In November 2008, a delegation of China Power Investment, the China Development Bank, and the Ministry of Mining agreed to continue with large investments in the mining and infrastructure sector, mostly agreed under Conté. This led to six exploration projects in the Boké, Boffa, and Téliélé regions, known for their high-grade ores. After the death of President Conté a month later, Captain Moussa Dadis Camara seized control. Despite the AU and the ECOWAS condemning the coup, the Chinese Ambassador to Conakry insisted that the coup would make no difference to Beijing's policy towards Guinea.

16 A long description of ZTE's activities can be found in *Le Quotidien de Nouakchott*, 30 December 2010, p. 4.

17 'Mauritania, China launch Nouakchott port project', *Xinhua*, 26 September 2010. 'Nouveau port minéralier: le casse-tête chinois à la SNIM', *Le Quotidien Nouakchott*, 26 April 2010.

18 UN Comtrade, HS 2601, tonnages, with China as reporter.

19 In 2008 an interim management committee took over the management of the Compagnie des Bauxites de Guinée from Alcoa. The government rescinded Rio's licence to exploit the Simandou iron mine.

Under the new government talks were picked up by the mining minister, Mahmoud Thiam. He once more suggested that Chinalco should invest in Simandou, but Chinalco was already fleshing out an agreement to operate the project jointly with Rio.²⁰ After Rio pulled out of this deal, Thiam stated again that Chinese firms would be ‘a strategic partner in all mining projects’. But, in the meantime, the Rio share had been passed on to a private Israeli miner, who, in turn, also approached the Chinese for co-financing.²¹ In 2010, Rio and Chinalco firmed up a new deal, signed in the Great Hall of People in Beijing, to exploit Rio’s remaining part of Simandou. The terms of the agreement included the stipulation that the Australian firm would operate the project and that all iron ore was to be shipped to China.

The Simandou project was part of a broader strategy of the Chinese government to tie Chinese metal and mining companies to large foreign suppliers like Rio. To that end, Chinalco had received more than US\$21 billion in loans from Chinese policy banks.²² In the meantime, Conakry also concluded an agreement with the China Investment Fund (CIF), a private fund based in Hong Kong. It reportedly included US\$7 billion of investments spread over infrastructure projects, diamond mining, iron, bauxite, and oil. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that China had nothing to do with it: ‘As far as we know, this is the corporate behaviour of an international company registered in Hong Kong. ... China has assisted Guinea in its economic development and improvement of people’s wellbeing within our capacity. As a developing country, China has South–South Cooperation with Guinea based on equality, mutual benefit, international norms and market rules.’²³ At the time of writing, no mainland Chinese companies had been invited by the CIF as contractors. Instead, CIF picked the small British mining company Bellzone to dig for iron.²⁴

In January 2009, President Marc Ravalomanana of Madagascar was toppled by a military coup that installed Andry Rajoelina as the new strongman of the country. The power seizure was immediately condemned by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the African Union, France, and the United States. China refrained from making a formal statement. Even though the Chinese ambassador denied

20 A non-binding accord to acquire a 44.65 percent share – an investment of US\$1.4 billion – of the project.

21 ‘China flirts again with Chinalco’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 October 2009.

22 ‘Chinalco raises \$21 billion loan for Rio deal’, *Mining Journal*, 27 March 2009.

23 ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Ma Zhaoxu’s Regular Press Conference’, 15 October 2009, <<http://www.chinaembassy-org.be/eng/fyrth/t620826.htm>> (14 April 2011).

24 Tom Burgis, ‘CIF to fund \$2.7bn Bellzone Guinea project’, *Financial Times*, 24 May 2010.

any official involvement, the riot police soon showed up with new Chinese riot control equipment.²⁵ At the level of commerce and low politics, relations were upheld. In July 2009, the China Fishery Group concluded important agreements to expand its operations in Malagasy waters.²⁶ In August 2009, an agreement was signed with the Ministry of Education to open a Confucius institute at the University of Antananarivo and to invite twelve students to study in China. An agreement was also concluded to boost tourism.²⁷ State-owned China Nonferrous Metal Mining invited the Malagasy Ambassador to explore the host government's 'care and support' for possible investment projects.²⁸ In November 2009, China vowed to facilitate the presence of the country at the World Expo in Shanghai. The following month, US\$30 million in aid was provided for managing the impact of the cyclone season.²⁹ Talks continued with state-owned Yanchang Petroleum Group to participate in the development of two oil blocks, together with Hong Kong-based Sunpec, which had earlier hired President Rajoelina's father as special adviser. The transitional government included a key contact of Chinese companies, José Ramaherison, also called Kung-Fu Master Gao, in a special economic committee for re-launching the economy.³⁰

In April 2010, Maître Gao reportedly brought a delegation of seventeen Chinese companies to the Presidential Palace to discuss investment in the chrome, gold, and oil sectors. The same month, four private Chinese concerns were created,³¹ managed by Kwan Tak Yan, a Guangdong businessman who was involved in the earlier deal between Yanchang and Sunpec. Guan Deming, a private Chinese investor, set up the International Mining Research Group and Sino Malagasy Mining Corporation. Another broker was Hui Chin Min, an investor who was also a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. In April 2010, Wuhan Iron and Steel agreed a joint venture with the local government to exploit the Soalala mine, which reportedly contained 800

25 'Dotation de matériels anti-émeute', *All Africa*, 20 February 2009.

26 'Zhongguo Shuichan Zonggongsi shouguo Madajiasijia yuye gongsi' [China National Fisheries Corporation to acquire fishing rights in Madagascar], *African Business Network*, 25 December 2009.

27 Didier Rambelo, 'Foire COTTM de Beijing: une percée sur le marché touristique chinois', *Midi Madagasikara*, 18 May 2010; 'Inauguration de l'Institut Confucius', *La Vérité*, 14 November 2009.

28 'Madajiasijia zhuhua dashi dao fang Zhongguo Youse Kuangye Jituan' [Ambassador of Madagascar to visit China Non-Ferrous Metal Group], Baidu media agency, 7 January 2010.

29 'Zhongguo xiang Madajiasijia juanzeng jiuzaiwuzi' [China donated relief supplies to Madagascar], *Liberation Army Daily*, 13 December 2009.

30 'La société chinoise Sunpec envisage de construire une raffinerie à Madagascar', *Xinhua*, 6 May 2010.

31 Madagascar Chromium, Madagascar Copper Group, Madagascar New Mineral Development, and Madagascar Non Ferrous Resources.

million tons of iron ore.³² What became the Hong Kong-based Wisco Guangxin was owned by Wuhan Steel (42 percent), the state-owned Guangdong Foreign Trade Group Co. (38 percent), and Kam Hing International Holdings (20 percent).

It was reported that the Chinese business and diplomatic community also maintained relations with trustees of ousted President Ravalomanana. Chinese Ambassador Wo Ruidi, for example, reportedly had meetings with Fetison Rakoto Andrianirina, a co-president from the Ravalomanana camp.

In the Azelik area of Niger, the state-owned China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) announced a new US\$53 million deal to mine uranium on 25 January 2010. The deal was facilitated by a brother of the President, Mamadou Tandja. Economic relations under Tandja had been booming, with Chinese companies buying into the local oil, uranium, and cotton businesses. The Chinese government in return provided financial aid and packages of military aid. Less than a month after the CNNC deal, however, Tandja was ousted by a military putsch.³³ ECOWAS suspended Niger and the US froze its economic relations. France, also involved in major uranium talks, did not make any strong statement. But whereas the new leader Salou Djibo had been promising to revise the economic agreements of his predecessor, nothing happened. 'Our diplomatic relations with China were not affected by the coup d'état,' said Mahaman Laouali Dan Dah, a spokesman for the junta. Niamey also expressed its willingness to revive cooperation in the energy sector and to protect the security of Chinese companies.³⁴

As in the case of the Central African Republic, Beijing offered aid to the new government to keep its administration afloat. 'For some time now, a campaign of attacks and slander has been orchestrated against the mutual cooperation between Niger and China in general and the two ongoing projects in particular,' stated Xia Huang, the Chinese ambassador to Niger, whereas 'the Nigerien people are eye-witnesses to the benefits of the friendship between the two countries and the direct beneficiaries of the achievements of this multi-form cooperation.'³⁵ In an interview with the *Financial Times* Xia took the same firm, business-as-usual line: 'After the events of February 18, the new Nigerien authorities have

32 Zhang Qi, 'Wuhan Steel gets green light for Africa ventures', *China Daily*, 25 May 2010; 'Madagascar: un deuxième chèque de 50 millions de dollars remis par un groupe sidérurgique chinois', *Chine Nouvelle*, 17 June 2010.

33 Virginie Baudais and Grégory Chauzal, 'The 2010 coup d'état in Niger: a praetorian regulation of politics?' *African Affairs* 110, 439 (2011) pp. 295–304

34 'Niger: amélioration de la situation, les ressortissants chinois quittent l'ambassade', *Xinhua*, 23 February 2010.

35 'China defends business operations in Niger', *Global Times*, 8 April 2010.

reaffirmed to us the strong will to develop political and economic relations and cooperation between Niger and China.³⁶

Unravelling China's policy of adjustment

In the course of the five coups between 2003 and 2010, China's responses hardly changed. Beijing continued to pursue a very conservative form of restraint. There were no condemnations, no sanctions. Neither did China abandon its state-centric posturing. Disregarding the regime in place, the Chinese considered it the duty of the state to bring back national stability and to create the security that was required for economic development. In all five cases, Beijing demanded that the new government ensured protection for Chinese citizens and infrastructure. In Niger, for example, the Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy was asked to continue to defend the China National Nuclear Corporation against attacks by Tuareg rebels of the Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ), which had targeted foreign uranium and oil companies for supporting alleged discriminatory practices. After several Chinese stores were looted during the Malagasy uprising of February 2009, the Embassy demanded that the new government prevent further violence and crime against Chinese companies.³⁷ In return, China provided the new regimes with different kinds of aid. When local African news media covered high-level inspections of Chinese construction projects or donation ceremonies, these events were giving the impression of international recognition and depicted as achievements of the new government.³⁸ While it was emphasized in official Chinese statements that advancing economic cooperation mainly had to help local societies, no conditions were attached to the advance payments that companies often had to make for starting new mining operations. Hence on the whole security has been bartered for external legitimacy and support that helped to keep newly established regimes upright.

Looking at China's preference for unilateral or international responses, it is striking to see how bluntly it ignored criticism or sanctions from

36 'China to expand Niger operations', *Financial Times*, 21 May 2010.

37 Feng Feifei, 'Madajiasijia Hua shang zao xijie' [Chinese merchants looted in Madagascar], *Qianjiang Evening News*, 10 February 2009.

38 'Ji buzhang shicha wo tiyuchang huo yiyuan xiangmu gong' [Several Ministers visited stadium and hospital construction projects], Economic Counsellor Office Conakry, 12 March 2010; 'Madajiasijia nongyebu zhang wei wo yuan ma zajiao shuidao zhuanjia ji gaoji nongye zuanjia shouxun' [Madagascar Minister of Agriculture gives highest honour to specialist of hybrid rice agriculture project], Economic Counsellor Office, Antananarivo, 17 June 2010; 'Nirier zhuangbei buzhang shicha wo yuan jian di er qiao xiangmu gongdi' [Niger Minister of Equipment inspected site of bridge reconstruction project], Economic Counsellor Office Niamey, 15 April 2010.

African regional organizations. Indeed, internal divisions prevented these bodies from going farther than condemning the coups. Neither did they have the capacity to engage countries like China. Yet, the neglect that Beijing displayed was in strong contrast with its repeated pledges to support the role of these bodies. The Addis Ababa Action Plan (2004–6), for instance, stressed the need to support ‘the African Union and other sub-regional African organizations in preventing, mediating, and resolving conflicts’.³⁹ Communication with Western countries was almost non-existent. At the 2009 session of a dialogue with the EU on African affairs, China was prepared to discuss ‘unconstitutional changes of government’, but this debate was limited to taking stock of the situation at that moment.

Whereas it has often been argued, not least by Chinese officials, that Beijing separates commerce from politics, the five cases show that these two dimensions cannot be uncoupled, and that mercantilism continued to underpin economic relations with Africa. Four main types of Chinese companies and business relations are engaged in African countries. There are the large state- or province-owned enterprises, which even in times of political uncertainty have managed to expand their footprint, mainly in the sectors of infrastructure, energy, mining, and agriculture. Even though these players have their own agendas, their overseas ambitions are the result of Beijing’s aspiration to create Chinese production and supply chains. Moreover, the national government has had the final say in all their projects. By decree, large investments have to be given a green light by the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Commerce. This was certainly the case for Chinalco in Guinea, China National Nuclear Corporation in Niger, and Wuhan Iron and Steel in Madagascar. Often, they were supported with export buyer’s credits or other loans, which all needed to be cleared by Chinese policy banks and the Ministry of Finance. I have mentioned the US\$21 billion loan facility for Chinalco, but Wuhan Iron and Steel also received at least US\$2.6 billion in credit from the China Development Bank to secure overseas iron ore reserves.⁴⁰ China National Nuclear Corporation’s investments in Niger were backed by US\$95 million in export credit from the EXIM Bank. Commenting on Chinalco’s role in Guinea, a senior consultant involved in the African operations of a large international mining company stated that the company was not actually guided by the government to invest in Guinea, but that once it set its mind on the project, it received the full diplomatic

39 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation – Addis Ababa Action Plan, Paragraph 2.2.2.

40 ‘CDB extends 80b yuan in credit to Wuhan Iron & Steel’, *Global Times*, 8 September 2009.

and financial support of the national government.⁴¹ Referring to the Guinea case, an officer in a mining company confirmed: 'It is macro-management. The reality is that Beijing sets out the legal and financial beacons for these mining companies. As long as they stay within these beacons they can get whatever backing for whatever project they want.'⁴²

Private companies also play a role. They are active in almost every sector, but mainly in mining and food processing. Like the state-owned enterprises, they too needed approval to invest. They had to follow countrywide investment guidelines to benefit from Chinese loans, consular services, and economic diplomacy. Besides these two types of companies, individual fortune seekers became perhaps the most visible layer of the growing relations with the five troubled states. In all capitals, private individuals set up hotels, restaurants, shops and trading businesses. Many of them maintained close linkages with the local Chinese embassy. Most embassies kept a list of small companies and maintained functional relations.

Finally, there were large groups of 'pseudo-Chinese': traders and companies that were perceived as Chinese, but often came from Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong or Taiwan. This was the case with the China Investment Fund in Guinea and Sunpec in Madagascar. Kam Hing International Holdings, which also became involved in Madagascar's mining business, is a Hong Kong-based holding that has most of its assets in Guangdong and maintains close linkages with local political and business leaders. Its core business in China was garment spinning, which led it to Madagascar to serve the African market, but once there the mining sector of the island state presented a new opportunity.⁴³

It has been a deliberate policy of the Chinese government to build a very diffuse network of economic relationships. Some of them were the result of direct state guidance, others were private initiatives, but they all had to serve the development of the motherland. The go-global strategy, which stimulated companies to tap overseas markets, was an obvious part of this strategy. But even individual Chinese entrepreneurs were expected to make a contribution to national growth. Already back in the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping stressed that 'foreign relations are a good thing' and that the Chinese diaspora could be a vital interface with markets abroad. In 2005, President Hu Jintao called for 'uniting the hearts of the overseas

41 Personal communication, mining consultant, London, 21 January 2011.

42 Personal communication, international mining company official, London, 21 January 2011.

43 Kam Hing International Holdings, 'About us', Kam Hing International webpage, <www.kamhingintl.com/en/aboutus/index.htm> (3 April 2011).

Chinese, to form an overseas force and to contribute to the achievement of the grand objective of [building] a well-off society.’⁴⁴ In the five states, private entrepreneurs were important importers of ‘Made in China’ products and often provided in-kind services to Chinese officials, like low-priced lunches and cheap hotel accommodation. Chinese networks in all five capitals were strong, with large numbers of Chinese participating in events organized by the embassies or companies.⁴⁵

This brings us to the role of embassies in facilitating trade. In the five countries, Chinese embassies became the largest foreign representation, with twenty to thirty employees. During the episodes of political instability, they actively tried to enhance the security and well-being of Chinese citizens. Ambassadors exerted pressure on transitional governments to prevent Chinese assets being attacked or looted. Expatriates were kept informed about political developments via email and the embassies’ websites. In the coups in Madagascar and Niger, the embassy offered sanctuary to Chinese families. At least as important has been the work of the Economic Counsellor Offices. These are the representations of the Ministry of Commerce, but cooperate closely with the embassies. After the coups, the Economic Counsellor Offices were quick to establish relations with the new regimes. They organized small donations of aid: medicines for the Mauritian and Nigerien governments; office equipment, drinking water and medical facilities for the junta of Guinea.⁴⁶ They all employed specialized officials to follow specific parts of the local market and maintain close relations with counterparts in relevant ministries. These diplomats screened the market for business opportunities and via a large mailing network they matched Chinese with local companies. This went from large mining projects to contracts for the delivery of ice machines, biscuit machines, balloons, and headscarves.

China’s responses to political instability in Africa were thus characterized by conservative restraint, unilateralism, and mercantilism. Indeed, China has stressed its support for regional organizations, but it hardly coordinated with those bodies in response to the five coups studied in this article. It also became clear that while ‘China’ is often a matter of a very heterogeneous group of official, semi-official, and private actors, in the end the national government expects those players to contribute to

44 ‘Cong haiwai guangxi shi ge hao dongxi dao qiaowu goanzuo san de dayoy zuowei’ [From ‘the overseas people relationship is a good thing’ to ‘overseas people can achieve a great deal of work’], *China Business News Network*, 1 March 2009.

45 The websites of embassies in those countries listed several events, networks, and projects with Chinese expats.

46 ‘Yuan ji wuzi yijao’ [Transfer of various aid materials], Economic Counsellor Office, Conakry, 15 June 2010.

China's national growth, maintains close relations with them, and continues to control several levers that influence their behaviour.

Drivers and justifications

There are various reasons why China adapts quickly to political changes. First, coups are not seen as major threats to Chinese economic interests.⁴⁷ In the five cases studied, new strongmen never made decisions harmful to Chinese investors. On the contrary, even though the need for stability and the status quo has been underscored by Beijing, regime changes have strengthened China's bargaining position and opened doors for companies to start prestigious infrastructure projects.

Attacks against Chinese citizens were rare and violence was often short-lived. Only in Madagascar were shops looted and some expatriates evacuated to the embassy.⁴⁸ A top Chinese diplomat summarized this situation as follows: 'During the recent coups, we experienced temporary negative influence, but the caretaking transition government did not have much time to deal with economic affairs and after a while things gradually normalized. Our economic operations have been delayed, but not interrupted. This might be the unavoidable price of doing business in unstable countries.'⁴⁹ In an interview with a Chinese newspaper, the Economic Counsellor to Guinea echoed these views: 'Guinea's military is in place now and the normal practices in mining development did not change. Chinese companies should not be much affected.'⁵⁰ This calm attitude was also reflected by news media. In an article about the coup in Niger, Xinhua News Agency reported that violence had only a minimal impact on the life of Chinese expats and did not affect Chinese construction projects.⁵¹ After the other coups, too, journalists reported a swift return to precarious stability.⁵²

47 Interview, Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Beijing, 2 June 2010; interview, CFA official, Beijing, 1 June 2010.

48 'Nirier tufa zhengbian Zhongguo shiguan quanli hu qiao wu jiren shangwang' [No casualties in Niger coup thanks to efforts of the Chinese Embassy in Niger to protect expats], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 February 2010.

49 Interview, Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Beijing, 2 June 2010.

50 'Jineiya zhengbian juanchan gongsi kaifa weishou ying xiang' [Development of Chinese mining firm not affected by coup in Guinea], China Enterprise News Channel, 3 January 2009.

51 'Nirier zhengbian dui Zhongguo gongcheng ren yuan he huaren yinxiang buda' [Coup in Niger has little impact on Chinese workers], *Xinhua*, 27 February 2010.

52 'Zhenbian huo de Maolitaniya jushi' [The situation in Mauritania after the coup], *People's Daily*, 7 August 2008; 'Maolitaniya fasheng junshi zhengbian hou jushi pinjing' [All quiet in Mauritania after the coup], *Xinhua*, 7 August 2008; Bai Jingshan, 'Madajiasisjia zhengzhi weiji duanqi nanyi huajie' [Difficult to predict an instant solution to the political crisis in Madagascar], *Xinhua*, 13 April 2009.

Second, Chinese observers tended to accept instability as a part of African political life and were sceptical of the prospects for rapid improvement. The common view was that political volatility was inherent in Africa's development stage and that coups would be prevalent while countries remained stuck in poverty.⁵³ An official of the Ministry of Commerce remarked that as long as underdevelopment continued to aggravate social, ethnic, and religious tensions, it would be naïve to expect effective governments. 'Only gradual economic reform will create the conditions for states to mature. In the meantime, China has to be flexible and create new opportunities for both political leaders and African societies,' he asserted.⁵⁴ 'There are corrupt politicians,' an adviser to the central leadership stated, 'but at least they [the Africans] start to have the meat to eat and they can have a soup. Gradually the situation will improve.'⁵⁵ An official from the Central Foreign Affairs Office observed that coups were a struggle to access scarce economic opportunities and that China would be able to maintain its position in Africa providing that it created new opportunities.⁵⁶ The senior diplomat, quoted earlier, observed that in the cycles of instability, constitutional transition periods were short, normally about a year, and that Chinese actors had adapted to this pattern.⁵⁷

State media also argued that it would be difficult to stop the sequence of coups because of deep-seated social and political weaknesses. One correspondent observed that African politics has been a vicious chain of instability, with failing efforts to centralize power under the banner of democracy or the fight against corruption.⁵⁸ An article in the state mouthpiece *Xinhua* stated that grievance in Niger was caused by President Tandja's decision to dissolve Parliament and to sign a constitutional amendment that allowed a president unlimited tenures.⁵⁹ Other articles pointed at the 'incompetence' and 'corruption' under CAR's President Patassé and criticized Guinean President Conté's dictatorship-democracy.⁶⁰ The Chinese are thus

53 Interview, Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Beijing, 2 June 2010; interview, Central Foreign Affairs Office official, Beijing, 1 June 2010; interview, MOFCOM official, Beijing, 3 June 2010; interview, expert, China Centre of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Beijing, 1 June 2010.

54 Interview, Ministry of Commerce official, Beijing, 3 June 2010.

55 Interview, senior expert, Chinese think tank, Brussels, 5 May 2010.

56 Interview, Central Foreign Affairs Office official, Beijing, 1 June 2010.

57 Interview, Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Beijing, 2 June 2010.

58 Duanfang Tao, 'Nirier: Hui kuai you diqi gongheguo ma' [Niger: There will be the Seventh Republic], *China Daily*, 23 February 2010.

59 'Nirier zhengbian zongtong bei kouya jin bai huaqiao Huaren zan zhu Zhongguo Shiguan' [Niger coup: hundreds of Chinese temporarily evacuated in the Chinese Embassy], *Xinhua*, 20 February 2010.

60 'Jineia, junshi zhengbian lianxiang beihou you xianxing yuanyin you yinxing yuanyin' [Unknown causes of the coup and chaos in Guinea], Sohu China News Report, 24 December 2008.

certainly not blind to the troubled political economy of African countries. The prevalent perception was that these problems were structural, that they would likely persist, and that China should adapt to such political contexts rather than trying to change them.

This brings us to a third element. As much as the Chinese were cautious about the situation in Africa, they were sceptical of the option of promoting democracy as an antidote to political instability. 'Western democracy cannot work in poor countries,' the senior diplomat explained. Referring to the lack of overall development and governance capacity, he cited the case of Niger where 'according to the draft constitutions, only one fourth of the members of Parliament needs to be literate'.⁶¹ There has been a strong consensus among Chinese decision makers and opinion leaders that multi-party democracy is not compatible with African society and Africa's development.⁶² Democracy, it is believed, complicates the distribution of scarce economic opportunities. 'It does not make much sense to promote good governance without development,' a senior policy adviser claimed. Moreover, it was widely held that underdevelopment rendered countries dependent on the West and that interference by Western interests deepens political fault lines. 'The Western system imposed on Africa created chaos,' a Professor at the Central Party School posited: 'The colonial rule still has its impact on Africa. Africans still cannot clothe or feed themselves. Western media have spread biased views.'⁶³ A *Xinhua* article claimed that coups prove that the Western democratic model is not working in Africa. 'Because of Africa's economic backwardness many ordinary people cannot receive education to understand the necessary information and thus cannot make an objective choice. Hence, it is difficult for them to fulfil their democratic rights.'⁶⁴ Democracy is also estimated to be incompatible with Africa's complicated ethnic structure. 'Western colonial rule destroyed this home-grown democracy of tribes,' one journalist contended.⁶⁵ Li Wentao, a researcher at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) wrote that because of the impact of neo-colonialism, 'multi-party elections' have become flawed 'tribal elections' and because of growing tribal cleavages

61 Interview, Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Beijing, 2 June 2010.

62 For example: He Wenping, 'Minzhu yu Feizhou de zhengzhi fazhan [Democracy and political development in Africa], Xi Yia Feizhou [West Asia and Africa], January 2004; Wang Yingying, 'Dui Feizhou minzhuhua de zhao sikao' [Rethinking democratization in Africa], Guoji Wenti Yanjiu [International studies], June 2002; Li Anshan, 'Feizhou minzhuhua yu guojia minzu jiangou de beilun' [The paradox of nation building and democracy in Africa], Shijie Minzu [World ethno-nationalistic studies], retrieved at Dr Li's blog, <blog.china.com.cn/lianshan/art/1854.html> (14 April 2011).

63 Interview, Central Party School scholar, Beijing, 4 June 2010.

64 Zhao Zhuo Yun, 'Xi fangshi minzhu zai Feishou shuitubufu' [Western-style democracy not adapted to Africa], *Xinhua*, 8 May 2009.

65 *Ibid.*

'armed forces become guardians of stability'.⁶⁶ While most experts have stressed the need for transparency, this sceptical view of liberal recipes for Africa explains the reluctance to join forces with the West in promoting democracy or political rights.

Fourth, the Chinese were not convinced that Western governments and companies were themselves serious about promoting democracy and good governance. To start with, the promotion of democracy was considered a pretext for political interference, which was essentially to support the interests of Western powers. Reporting on the coup in Niger, a journalist of the popular agency Sohu China News Report asserted: 'Multi-party democracy leads to conflict. Economic backwardness allows Western countries to interfere and impose democratic values via conditional aid. Domestic democratic processes are still manipulated by Western interest groups.'⁶⁷ In the coup in Niger, for example, the posturing of France was explained by the presence of Areva in the Nigerien uranium sector.⁶⁸ Concerning the coup in Guinea, Chinese spectators pointed at the importance of Russian and American interests in the bauxite industry.⁶⁹ Regarding Mauritania, it was suspected that France and the United States tacitly backed the coup because of the 'Islamist tendency' of President Abdullahi.⁷⁰

Chinese observers also noticed incoherence among Western donors and in their policies towards different African countries.⁷¹ In case of the coup in Mauritania, the *People's Daily* reported that France supported the junta leader Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and that the rest of the European Union was divided over imposing sanctions.⁷² In addition, it was broadly understood that Western and particularly European countries used liberal values to criticize China, and, in a protectionist mood, to counterbalance China in their backyard.⁷³ It has been asserted that Western governments were taken in tow by NGOs, which, without any responsibility, pursued dubious interests. China's reluctance to coordinate with Western countries has thus also to be put in the context of distrust towards their

66 Li Wentao, 'Juren gan zheng huichai: Feizhou daijie de zhengzhi nanti' [Military interference with politics: a pressing political problem in Africa], *Beijing Review*, 31 March 2010.

67 Piao Yingji, 'Nirier zhengbian nengfou zhouchu Feizhou minzhu guaiquan?' [Can democracy get Niger out of the coup cycle?], *China Report*, March 2010.

68 *Ibid.*

69 'Wo yi Meiyuan touzi Jineiya zao xifang dihui,' [West slanders US\$100 million of investment in Guinea], *Chongqing Chenbao* [*Chongqing Morning Post*], 15 October 2009.

70 'Guoji guancha zhengbian hou di Maolitaniya jushi' [International perspective: the situation in Mauritania after the coup], *Renmin Ribao* [*People's Daily*], 7 August 2008.

71 Interview, expert, China Development Institute, Beijing, 4 June 2010; interview, Central Foreign Affairs Office official, Beijing, 1 June 2010.

72 'Guoji guancha zhengbian hou di Maolitaniya jushi' [International perspective: the situation in Mauritania after the coup], *Renmin Ribao* [*People's Daily*], 7 August 2008.

73 For example: 'Xifang gongji wo yuanzhu Feizhou wu wo yao gao xinzhiminzhu' [Western countries accused of pursuing neo-colonialism], *Global Times*, 22 June 2006.

intentions and a low estimation of their legitimacy as guardians of democracy.

Implicitly, China has been guided by a strategy of adjustment. Even though gaining access to African markets and protecting newly gained economic assets have been recognized as matters of national security, there has never been a consistent strategy, doctrine, or political principle, save one: adjust! The main feature of China's responses to coups was its aptitude to adaptation. To some extent this manoeuvring was the product of the asymmetry between China's growing interests in these countries and the limited means to protect them.⁷⁴ Officials and experts have frequently stressed that China simply does not have the leverage to steer the capricious flow of political events in Africa. 'You might say that we are able to negotiate large business deals and make governments abide to the One-China principle,' an official at the Central Foreign Affairs Office posited. 'Yet this is by no means the same as having an impact on internal political tensions. Even if we had some influence, it would be naïve to assume that these problems can be managed by external powers.'

Prudent estimations of diplomatic leverage, however, were not the only explanation of China's chameleon strategy. Chinese officials emphasized the paradox between the linear strategizing of Western countries and the pragmatic posturing that features in Chinese strategic thinking. Often they refer to Deng Xiaoping's advice to keep a low profile and not to take the lead. This mindset has also been summarized as 'ling huo bian tong', according to which people should adapt to changing situations through flexibility and reflection on the connections between goals, attitudes, and behaviour.⁷⁵ Another dictum in contemporary Chinese diplomacy is 'qiong ze bian, bian ze tong', implying that if you are poor or weak, only adjustment can lead to success.

The strategy of adjustment in the first place entails knowledge of the terrain. In all the cases examined above, embassies have been the ears and eyes of the Chinese government. In recent years they have seen an impressive increase in staff – in both political and economic sections. In private conversations officials appeared very well briefed and ministries continued to step up their capacity to probe the political climate in partner countries. Another principle is to keep the transaction costs low. Intervention and interference are seen as the most costly policy option.⁷⁶ China therefore

74 Interview, Ministry of Commerce official, Beijing, 3 June 2010; interview, expert, CICIR, Beijing, 1 June 2010.

75 Li Xin, Lingling Qi, and Joel Wuthnow, 'The Beijing Consensus and China's multilateral diplomacy', draft paper, 2010.

76 Interview, Ministry of Commerce official, Beijing, 3 June 2010; interview, expert, CICIR, Beijing, 1 June 2010; interview, Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Beijing, 2 June 2010.

avoids openly taking positions or making clear commitments with regard to political elites and international organizations. Adjustment also implies avoiding resistance. China has been quick in responding to suspicion by making partial or pseudo-concessions to demands from civil society, local industries, and other donors. This closely relates to another guideline: to enhance resilience. While China's relations with the five countries has continued to be state-centric, it has broadened its charm offensive towards the rest of the local societies and regional organizations. Such diffuse relations have to make relations more 'coup-proof'. A last element: prevent escalation. China has thus far refrained from using force to protect its presence in African countries. In Niger, expats were temporarily withdrawn from exploration projects in the north of the country. In Madagascar, as mentioned earlier, about one hundred compatriots assembled in the embassy.

Conclusion

'Water shapes its course according to the nature of the ground over which it flows; the soldier works out his victory in relation to the foe that he is facing,' Sun Tzu wrote during the Spring and Autumn Period, 'Therefore, just as water retains no constant shape, so in warfare there are no constant conditions.' His advice is engrained in China's recent response to political instability in Africa. This article has demonstrated that China's response to African coups since 2003 has hardly changed. Beijing has continued to practice conservative restraint, has avoided being entangled in international sanctions, and has not moved an inch from its sovereigntist principles.

To avoid setbacks in its relations with these countries and to secure its economic interests, China has developed a diffuse form of mercantilism that comprises a large number of official and private actors. China's polices have been guided by the belief that coups did not constitute major threats to economic interests; a preoccupation with ensuring a climate of basic security for its economic interests; the assumption that external powers could not shape the complex context that produced political instability; outspoken scepticism about the relevance of democratic reforms; distrust regarding the intentions of other powers; and a long-standing strategy of adjustment. This article distils this strategy of adjustment into five main guidelines. First, gather information. Second, show restraint to avoid the cost of interference. Third, evade resistance. Fourth, enhance resilience. Fifth, prevent escalation.

Political instability in Africa has thus confirmed rather than reversed China's policies. This is not to say that China's strategies are static. One of the main explanations was that unrest was not perceived as a major threat. This could change, however. All in all, the People's Republic has

not yet been confronted with major incidents and violence. There has been a coincidence of self-restraint strategies with reasonably limited capabilities, a growing sense of vulnerability, limited violence against overseas Chinese, and a strong desire of the leadership to develop South–South cooperation for hedging the West. It remains to be seen how China’s attitudes will evolve if some of these factors change. Even though China’s mercantilism has been diffuse thus far, and hence deviates significantly from the foreign economic policies pursued by powers in the past, none of this is static. As China’s overseas economic interests are increasingly recognized as a matter of national security, it remains to be seen how its current policies will withstand more serious political instability.