

## Chinese Non-Interference Policy in Africa

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While holding an explicit policy of non-interference, China has engaged in various policies that have had influence in many different countries in Africa. This paper presents an exploration of the official Chinese state policy of non-interference and an explanation of the typology and definitions used to explore non-interference. Most substantively this paper presents an examination of the different types of interference and how they can be understood to contradict or align with China's official state policy. The paper concludes with an exploration of potential implications of economic investments abroad which may lead to more interference on the part of China.

**Keywords:** *Africa, China, economic investment, foreign policy, international relations, non-interference*

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### Introduction

Does China adhere to its non-interference policy in practice in Africa and is that policy compatible with increasing Chinese expansionism, particularly foreign economic investment in Africa? This paper will argue that despite China officially touting its non-interference policy, it broadly engages in interference through subtle and overt means. Furthermore, it would seem an underlying logic for interference is to increase stability which protects the economic investments and assets of China, thus China is likely to continue to interfere.

This paper will consist of four parts. First there will be an exploration of the official Chinese state policy of non-interference and its history. Second, there is an explanation of the typology and definitions used to explore non-interference. Thirdly, and most substantively, there will be an examination of the different types of interference and how they can be understood to contradict or align with China's official state policy. Finally, there will be an examination of the potential implications of economic investments abroad, which may lead to more interference on the part of

China. Throughout this paper there will be an interrogation of the rationality for interference and the importance of economic considerations.

### **Typologies and Definitions**

Before diving into China's respect for its non-interference principle in practice, it is important to define and conceptualize interference. Principally, there needs to be a definition of interference on which actions of nations can be classified to fit under. For the purposes of this paper, interference is any instance where the internal politics and affairs of a nation are intentionally influenced by a foreign actor for the foreign actor's own benefit. The examples for each type of interference are not exhaustive, but rather facilitate an understanding of how such interference can manifest. Additionally, much of the investment carried out by China is carried out by Chinese state-owned corporations or entities with strong ties to the Chinese state. This allows for some political cover for the Chinese state because the actions were not carried out directly by them, thus providing some deniability to accusations of interference.

Before looking at the three types of interference, a distinction needs to be made between openly recognized interference and interference in practice, as in many instances countries (specifically China), have incentives to deny interference. This paper will focus largely on interference in practice, as it captures the reality of the situation rather than whether nations individually or collectively call something interference. Many incentives exist for countries to categorize their own actions and the actions of allies as helpful requested aid. Meanwhile, the same actions when undertaken by adversaries are framed in more pejorative terms such as interference.

The first type of interference is *covert interference*: actions to interfere in the internal affairs of nations which are purposely hidden and denied by the interfering actor. The second type of interference is *subtle interference*: the use of economic and diplomatic incentives to make a country's domestic political actors more favorable to China. A third type, *overt interference*, can include direct

action which violates sovereignty or openly supports agents within a country to effect favorable political change.

### **Formal Policy of Non-Interference**

In order to understand China's actions in Africa, one must look at the formal Chinese state policy on interference and explore its history alongside how it has evolved to meet China's changing national interests. China has long claimed to have a non-interference policy in its foreign affairs, in which China claims to respect the absolute sovereignty of other nations over their domestic affairs. This broad foreign policy doctrine dates to 1949 when then foreign minister Zhou Enlai traveled to India and Myanmar to develop the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" (FPPC) which form the bedrock of contemporary understanding of Chinese non-interference (Jiabo 2004, 363).

The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, are "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC 2014). These principles have been the basis for China's emphasis on the sovereignty of a nation's control over their internal affairs, as well as being a general rejection of a global liberal order which seeks to impose liberal values and norms upon a country's domestic politics.

A historical lens is important with regards to Chinese non-interference policy. In 1949, China was not the emerging superpower one sees today, but rather was a desperately poor nation reeling from the horrific devastation of World War Two. Many Chinese people feared further colonization as they had suffered over the last century at the hands of the Japanese and European powers. (Callahan 2004, 203). Any Chinese foreign policy would need to reflect the need for China to make its own decisions free of foreign imposition, thus an emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of domestic affairs became a tenet of Chinese foreign policy.

The conception of the absolute sovereignty of internal affairs has manifested itself in a general reluctance of China to support interventions and, until recently, even peacekeeping operations in foreign countries. And while there have been some changes in the rhetorical justification of what actions qualify as interference, non-interference as a policy has endured the last 70 years which have included changes in governments, economic systems and societal ideology. Throughout time, the non-interference policy has remained a constant within Chinese foreign policy.

Even in the era of Xi Jinping and ever-increasing Chinese activity in Africa, China still upholds its non-interference policy as the official state policy. Shortly after his ascension to President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping gave a speech entitled "Carry forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence to build a better world through win-win cooperation". In the 2014 speech, Xi Jinping reaffirmed China's commitment to non-interference and its importance, stating that "In the new era today, the spirit of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, instead of being outdated, remains as relevant as ever; its significance, rather than diminishing, remains as important as ever; and its role, rather than being weakened, has continued to grow" (Jinping 2014).

Even some four years later in a 2018 address at the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, Xi Jinping reiterated the policy of non-interference. Making direct reference to the FFPC, Xi Jinping stated, "We follow a "five-no" approach in our relations with Africa: no interference in African countries' pursuit of development paths that fit their national conditions; no interference in African countries' internal affairs; no imposition of our will on African countries; no attachment of political strings to assistance to Africa; and no seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation with Africa" (Jinping 2018). While the Chinese state continues to boast about its non-interference policy, this paper will provide evidence that a non-interference policy was loosely enacted in Africa in practice and that China is intervening more over time.

## **Interference in Africa**

This paper will present case studies and instances of potential Chinese interference to determine the level of interference by the Chinese state. Exploring each category of interference and looking at numerous examples from Africa will help to establish a broader picture. Specific focus will be given to the economic mechanism through which interference is carried out and the potential economic benefits that may explain China's incentives for breaking its own state policy.

Covert interference, as the first category of interference, is by its nature the hardest to track. Exploring it rests on literature and sources based more in speculative evidence than traditional academic sources, but nonetheless is important to take into account. This category of interference is specifically important to look into in the case of China, as it has strong reasons to mask activities that could be classified as interference. It should be noted that many of the activities and actors involved in covert activities like espionage, operate under a mutual unacknowledged understanding that all nations will mutually deny they do.

While most covert operations only come to light years after they occur, if at all, some recent instances of covert Chinese interference in Africa can be observed. The most concrete form of this is in covert and often illegal weapons sales. While there is a growing supply of arms to Africa, China has specifically engaged in sales to some rebel groups. For example, China sold weapons to Laurent Kabila and the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire in the midst of the First Congo War (Taylor and Wu 2013, 468). There is also speculation Chinese arms fueled the civil war in Sierra Leone (Taylor and Wu 2013, 468) It would seem in some instances of civil war China backs non-governmental groups with arms shipments who align with their interests, specifically violating their commitment to the sovereignty of governments over their internal affairs.

Subtle interference, as the second category, is where most of Chinese interference can be found, particularly in the use of economic means to shape the internal affairs of a nation to its liking.

The nuanced nature of subtle interference makes the exact instances of interference hard to pin down and thus allows China to reject accusations of interference and maintain its official non-interference policy more easily. Evidence of subtle interference therefore necessitates finding linkages between seemingly basic foreign direct investment and the shaping of domestic politics in favor of Chinese interests. Finally, the very fact that many of these mechanisms for interference are and have been common practice among Western nations, does not weaken the claim that they are interference, but rather highlights the common use of economic means for subtle interference.

The first form of subtle intervention is the practice of investing in and purchasing information dissemination networks. These information dissemination networks include mass communication networks such as print media, radio and television, specifically those focused on news and current affairs, although colloquial narratives in general entertainment are also important. Additionally, creation of and influence over existing academic institutions has allowed China influence over the academic discourse, particularly on China-Africa issues.

An illustrative example of information control as subtle interference is Zambia, where China has invested heavily in both traditional media sources and academic institutions (Banda 2009, 348-349). China has invested heavily in Zambian state media infrastructure which allows for wider broadcasting by pro-Chinese state media organizations (Banda 2009, 348-349). Large influxes in funding to state media directly correlated with Zambian election years, as China looks to shore up support for the pro-Chinese regime (Banda 2009, 348-349). With growing debate within Zambian society over the Sino-Zambian relations and fear of excessive Chinese influence, China has invested heavily in keeping the current party in power by providing support during elections (Banda 2009, 348-349). With China owning many copper and other mineral mines in Zambia, it becomes clearer why China favors the status quo.

Within Africa, China has been investing heavily in Confucian institutions which propagate Chinese ideologies and worldviews, especially in Zambia. Not only do these institutions seek to crowd out existing institutions, but they actively restrict speakers and academics with critical views of China from participating in many events they host or sponsor (York 2018). In one instance, Kenyan law professor Patrick Loch Otieno Lumumba was denied entry into Zambia by state officials for “security concerns” despite being scheduled to speak at a conference (York 2018). Lumumba’s work and critical views on Chinese influence in Africa would seemingly give a pro-Chinese regime a reason to not want him to speak, particularly with growing concerns over China’s influence within the broader Zambian public (York 2018). And with the Chinese firm StarTimes now owning 60% of Zambia’s new digital service, Chinese influence continues to grow (York 2018).

In many ways the most impactful mechanism of subtle interference by China in Africa is investment in economic projects. These projects create dependence upon China for basic services and create potential debt traps threatening national sovereignty. The case of Kenya’s Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) project highlights this mechanism of subtle interference. With Chinese loans ballooning, the Kenyan national debt increased from an estimated 50% to 85% debt to GDP ratio, while China’s share of Kenya’s debt jumped from 24% to 72% between 2013 and 2018 (Peralta 2018). It is important to note that the terms of China’s loan are often undisclosed, so the conditions of defaults are unknown. However, if the 99-year lease of a Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port is any indication, the cost to sovereignty to rebalance loans may be extremely high (Abi-habib 2018). With the feasibility of debt repayment in question with many more projects around Africa, fears that these loans will lead to dependency on and potential ceding of sovereignty to China grows (Abi-habib 2018).

Overt interference is the most obvious form of interference. It holds the largest threat to a formal non-interference policy as China must defend obvious violation of its own doctrine. Instances of overt interference constitute judgments by the Chinese state that the benefits of interference (or

costs of non-interference) outweigh any losses to consistency and legitimacy on its non-interference policy. China has used rhetorical tools to bend the narrative to avoid acknowledging any violation of its policy, often portraying itself in a supporting rather than dictating role (Aidoo and Hess 2015, 133). The principal example of overt Chinese interference is South Sudan, both in the initial separation crisis in 2005 and the subsequent civil war. With Sino-Sudanese relations dating back to 1959, China played an active role in the partition of Sudan and the ending of the second Sudanese civil war. The significance of China's overt intervention in Sudanese affairs cannot be overstated. Long-time allies with an "all weather friendship", China made up a large portion of Sudan's trade, particularly Chinese oil imports (Large 2008, 93). However, the Darfur crisis and the growing instability of Omar al-Bashir's regime meant that non-interference cost China not only political capital but the possibility of a stable oil supply (Large 2008, 104-105). In a rare act of unity with the broader international community, China helped broker an end to the war and a partition of the nation (Verhoven 2014, 62). This action gained China legitimacy on the international stage and helped ensure stability in a region it economically benefited from.

The interference in Sudan and the newly independent South Sudan would not be a one-time affair. With a vast majority of Sudanese oil reserves located in the new South Sudan, China's need for a stable oil supply was essential (Verhoven 2014, 63). However, peace in South Sudan was short lived with the civil war breaking out in 2013, not two years after their 2011 independence. Once again, China broke its own non-interference policy to help broker peace between the warring factions in South Sudan; in the end China was able to help bring about the 2018 peace agreement, granting some level of stability to the region (Brosig 2020, 877).

### **Stability**

Looking broadly at instances of Chinese interference as a whole, two trends emerge in the logic for interference: stability for Chinese interests both in the present, and forging a predictable



future. On the first point of present stability, it becomes clear regardless of the category of interference that a universal goal is to either create stability or maintain stability. Whether it is negotiating a peace deal or influencing public sentiment, a common goal is to create or promote an environment where China can continue to invest (Large 2008 103). All economic investment requires a base level of stability. The Chinese state must be sure that its agreements will not be torn up by any change in government or general civil instability which could lead to war.

It is important to note, China has chosen selectively when to interfere (as there are many conflicts and situations in Africa where intervention on humanitarian grounds would seem justified). The need for stability helps explain China's backing of governments and regimes of all types (democratic to authoritarian) as it appears the key factor is promoting stability (Large 2008 103). Critical interference occurs where Chinese assets exist as a form of safeguarding those interests now and down the line.

The second key rationale for Chinese interference is predictability, which is attained through the creation of dependent structures. By linking the ability of a government to seize power in a civil war with weapons, or to maintain influence via broadcast networks, China places itself as a non-expendable actor to these governments. This key linkage means China can count these actors as stable and reliable partners going forward. By forming these dependent relationships, China creates preferable conditions for future investment and influence (Verhoeven 2014 66). Aside from the use of incentives targeted at actors' political aspirations, China also uses cohesive means.

The use of debt traps means that China creates a dependency of nations upon China which guarantees close ties and thus a stable environment for future investments and influence. These coercive pressures were also seen in Sudan and South Sudan as China leveraged its position as a key trading partner to attain its political ends. Additionally, the spread of pro-Chinese thought through media and academia means the likelihood of instability caused by Chinese critics is lessened.

## **Conclusion**

Upon examining the different categories of interference, it is clear China in many instances has and will continue to violate its non-interference policy. Whether through covert, overt, or subtle means, an underlying logic is apparent: the goal is stability. This stability provides protection for Chinese interests in Africa, specifically its economic assets and investments. Interference to create stability for Chinese interests results in not only a wealthier China but a more influential China. Thus, interference by China in Africa has not only continued to occur but will likely continue and increase.

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