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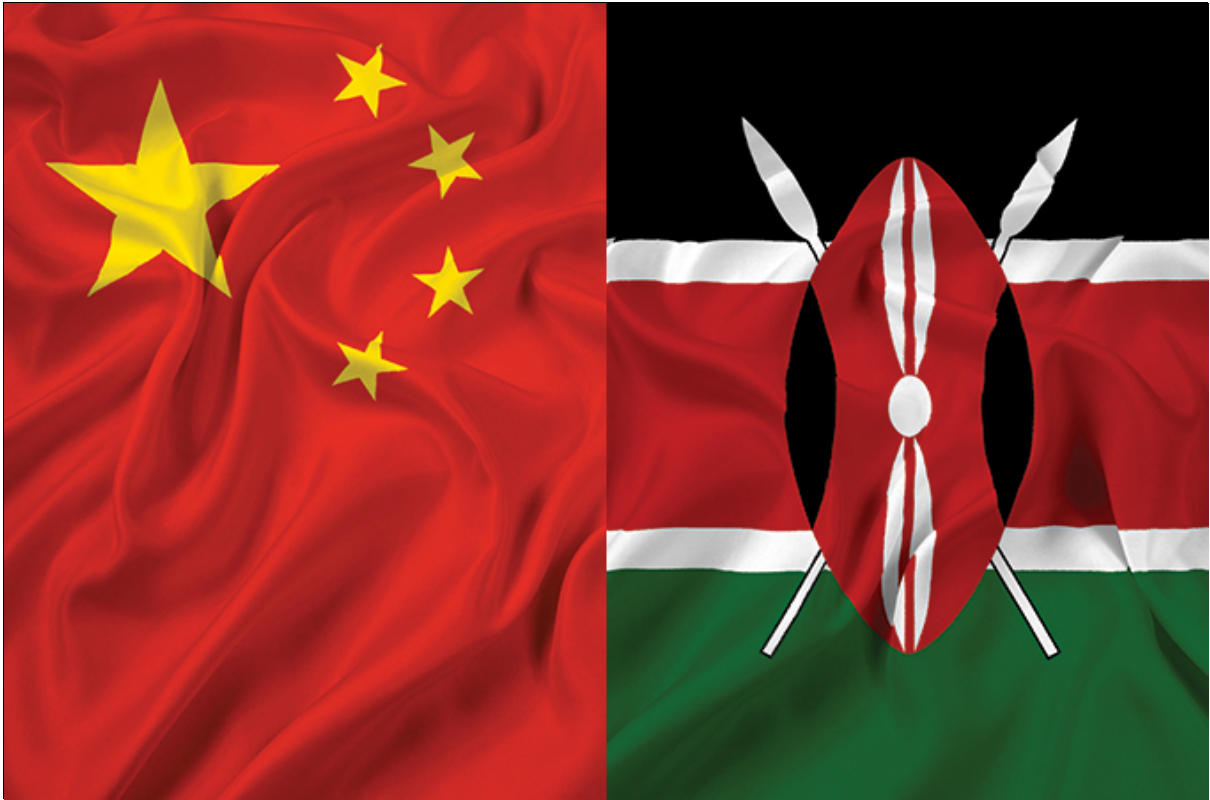
Report

The Myths and Realities of Kenya's turning to the East

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Abstract

Kenya's foreign policy since the ascension to power of the Jubilee coalition in March 2013 has been faced with serious ambiguity. This is attributed to the two cases at the International Criminal Court (ICC) facing President Kenyatta and his Deputy William Ruto. As such, dispensing of the cases has occupied a central position within the new administration with unlimited resources being devoted to state functionaries dealing with the cases.

Introduction

This has been demonstrated in the number of visits to foreign capitals by senior government officials soliciting support against the International Criminal Court. In this venture Uganda has remained a strong ally. Kenya at the same time chose a less travelled path – ambiguity in her foreign policy. In this, the country appeared to be heading towards the East with China as the main beneficiary.

In this confusion, Kenya has had mixed results, as it has been able to project an assertive image in the international scene particularly in dealing with African countries. This is largely true in dealing with ICC cases – where rhetoric on neo-colonialism and Pan Africanism has reigned high. On the other hand, the regime appears vulnerable given the pressure from the western governments and the two cases at The Hague. The cases at ICC in particular that have contributed to the hostility displayed against the

west both during and immediately after elections – and threats of going to the East with China and Russia being the main destinations.

In reality, the West plays a central role in the daily operations of Kenya. The Kenyan government is confronted by unlimited challenges. For instance, there is the lingering perception of the government being tribal and exclusionary. In reality, it is the fast dissipation of the rhetoric against perceived “neo-colonial” and “imperialist” interference in Kenya’s internal affairs by Washington, White Hall, and the European Union that seemed in vogue as the Jubilee Government began its administration.

Kenyan and Chinese Relations

Following ascension to power by the Jubilee coalition and perceived anti-western stance, China was quick to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the political rhetoric. In the process, several major projects are in the pipeline amidst a litany of procurement questions. This is of course against a background of a growing relationship between the two countries in the areas of trade, infrastructure, cultural cooperation and diplomacy. Clearly, the visit to Beijing by President Uhuru Kenyatta upon assuming office may have been informed by the growing economic linkage between the two countries.

President Kenyatta led a strong delegation made up of senior government officials, technocrats and business people to China and secured about \$5 billion (Sh425 billion) in investments from China covering railways, energy, wildlife protection and joint ventures. (1) One of the projects being rolled out is the standard gauge railway linking Mombasa port and Malaba that is expected to improve access to Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. (2) This is amidst many questions on procurement procedures that appear to have been flouted.

The visit by President Kenyatta was almost sensational in the media. On the first day of the visit the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post trumpeted a headline; President Uhuru Kenyatta Looks East from Beijing to Moscow. In December 2013, the Star newspaper reported Deputy President William Ruto as praising China as a “true friend of Kenya”: Ruto had praised the Chinese leadership for refusing to be “herded in strange destinies” by the West. In a veiled attack on Europe and the United States, Ruto saw the Chinese government as a “worthy teacher, partner, true friend and a friend indeed” to the people of Kenya. These remarks were made during a ceremony to mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Kenya and China. (3)

But is Kenya Really Turning East?

This question among others remains relevant particularly with the increasing influence of countries in the East given their growing economic strengths. What could be the driving force? Or is the ascendancy of the Jubilee regime after the elections in March 2013 the main factor, and if so, why? A limited review of the public utterances, including the rhetoric at national and regional forums indicate that the Jubilee regime is anxious to legitimize its “nationalist” and “Pan Africanist” credentials, publicly exemplified by among other things, the increasingly warm relations between Nairobi and Beijing.

However, a scrutiny of the Kenyan politics reveals a complex and multi-layered picture full of contradictions and discontinuities. Perhaps the most overt reality check comes from this 6 January 2014 the Business Daily report that Treasury had asked the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an emergency loan it plans to use in responding to looming economic shocks. The loan, which is part of the agenda that the Kenya government discussed with visiting IMF chief Christine Lagarde, strengthens the Washington-based lenders’ hand in Kenya’s public policy after a decade of decline.

The contradictions between reality and political posturing point to the fact that beyond the anti-Western rhetoric, the Jubilee regime is firmly wedded to the fiscal orthodoxy of the Bretton Woods twins and the familiar prescriptions that come with the Washington Consensus package.

In addition, the term “turning east” is ideologically misleading. In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet bloc, it is disingenuous, to use cold war era terminology to describe 21st Century geo-political realities. In particular in the case of China, a persuasive argument can be made that retreat from the East/West dichotomies began much earlier, dating to the their triumph of the Deng Zao Ping clique over the Maoist faction led by Jiang Qing way back in 1976.

Deng who is considered the most influential Chinese leader after Mao successfully shepherded the Asian giant in radically transforming its ideological orientation while maintaining lip service to the shibboleths of “communism”. The Chinese “socialist market economy” undergirded by principles like “The Four Modernizations” have made China a global power rivaling the United States and other G-8 countries. In looking at China one needs to be guided by her contemporary national state and strategic interests rather than the obsolete East/West ideological straight jacket.

China and Africa

African perspectives of China in Africa (Pambazuka, 2007) presents an array of insightful comments from a cross section of scholars covering Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, Sudan, Liberia, Angola, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria and other countries on the content. In a particularly revealing chapter on the environmental impact of the Chinese foray into Africa, Michelle-Chan Fiselle documents a disturbing pattern. She cites the controversial deals China made in Sudan during a period when horrendous human rights atrocities were being committed in that country; talks about the “flagrant violation of the law” in Gabon where Chinese companies in the timber industry evade paying 60% of the taxes and states that up to 70% of the timber exports from Gabon to China are illegal; she talks of similar trends in the timber industry in Equatorial Guinea, Liberia and Cameroon. In the case of copper mining in Zambia, the same author indicts Chinese companies for the alarming number of accidents in the mines. (4)

Several writers including Annabela Ribeiro and Daniel Ribiero in another chapter in the same book talk about the proposed Mphanda Nkuwa dam a project in Mozambique that is seen as a good example of the problems linked to China’s lack of concern for human rights and the environmental impact of the projects they are financing. The US\$ 2.3 billion Mpanda Nkuwa dam proposal has caused considerable debate in Mozambique with civil society and the potentially affected communities raising numerous concerns. The project’s weak social and environmental assessment, high economic, environmental, social and technical risks and many other negative impacts had put Western funders such as the World Bank off the project. In spite of these problems... the China Exim Bank agreed to back the construction of the dam project... The dam will...undermine years of restoration works in the Zambezi delta (East Africa’s richest wetland) which has been damaged by the mismanagement of the Cahora Bassa dam, just over 70km upstream of Mphanda Nkuwa. (5)

Several scholars have attempted analysis of Chinese contribution to economic development in Africa, in this group is Njeri Sahle (2008) who argued that overall the Chinese state’s soft power strategy in Africa is aimed at gaining legitimacy; a development that enables the creation of conditions for it to achieve its national interest. Secondly, the nature of China’s approach to Africa is facilitating its objective of gaining legitimacy in a range of African social formations. In African ruling elite circles, China’s non-interference is welcomed mainly because of its lack of political conditionality.

This approach is desirable to the Kenyan political elite not keen to hear any conditions attached to development Aid. The Chinese arguably have no conditions and their

interests are clearly focused delivery of the project. This approach has enabled the Chinese to perfect their practice of accumulation by dispossession in their activities in contemporary Africa.

For instance, take the case of debt relief packages that China has offered some African countries. While China's debt relief has accorded the China political legitimacy with African states and the latter, room to manoeuvre in their responses to the (Western powers), the practice is contributing to the development of the national debt trap, a structural reality that places constraints in the economic capacity of African states. Further, these loans cover various sectors including the military industry.

Although Africa's trade with China has increased, economic relations between China and the continent are occurring on unequal terms. Chinese export to African countries range from cheap low-end consumer goods to high-end manufactured goods, such as machinery, textiles and apparel, accounting for 87 per cent of the country's export to the continent. Conversely, the backbone of the African export basket to China is primary commodities. A process of de-industrialization is one core result of the flooding of African markets with Chinese commodities.

In addition to the search for markets, securing and ensuring that it has reliable access to African natural resources is at the centre of China's economic strategy in Africa. Nowhere is this more evident than in China's strategy in the oil sector. China's practices in contemporary Africa in substance represent processes of accumulation by disruption rather than mutual benefit. In fact, when China perceives a threat to its economic practices, it does not hesitate to indicate its commitment to protecting its interests. (6)

Opportunism and Real Politics Drives Sino - Kenyan Ties

A review of press reports on Chinese activities in Kenya reveals on the one hand, a pre-occupation with trade and business matters. Thus, from the highly publicized Beijing official state visit by a high powered entourage led by President Uhuru Kenyatta to the furor over the controversial standard gauge railway contract the overriding leit motif is on the economic ties between the two states.

This works well for the political class in charge, for on the Kenyan side, there is an additional domestic impetus: the need to maintain the pseudo-nationalist onslaught on the "imperialist West" as a way of counteracting the negative publicity associated with the ongoing trials at the ICC against President Kenyatta and his Deputy, William Ruto. Thus, as in the case of other African countries, it clearly has a common template for

engaging with African countries. This is unlikely to change in the case of Kenya. The controversy over the second railway tender reveals that the business model remains despite resistance by the citizens.

The Jubilee government which dominates the Kenyan legislature and has a sizeable chunk of the devolved county governments under the sway of governors and members of county assemblies elected under the aegis of its constituent and affiliated political parties, nevertheless came to power under a much contested mandate.

At home, propelled by the so called "tyranny of numbers" it was seen by a large majority of Kenyans outside its social base as a regime catering to only two among Kenya's more than three dozens ethnic groups. In a country where tribal affiliations translate into patron-client state relations, there has been an outcry, especially in the area of public appointments with President Kenyatta's regime seem to be only favouring handpicked elites from among the Agikuyu and Kalenjin clusters, a tendency seen to be a departure from the heady promises of the 2010 Constitution and a throwback to the days of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi. In addition, there has been an outcry against the onslaught on civil and democratic liberties, especially targeting the media and the once vibrant civil society. Insecurity - whether one is referring to rampant and increasingly violent criminal activity or the wave of terrorist attacks unprecedented in Kenyan history - have made many observers indict the powers that be of abdicating their responsibilities of a government expected to provide for the safety and well being of its citizens.

Kenya has the dubious distinction in the world of being the only country in the world with an elected head of state and his deputy sitting in a dock at The Hague accused of being co-perpetrators of crimes against humanity and serious offences like murder, rape, displacement of communities and other large scale conspiracies.

The overture to China and the African Union are largely viewed as desperate last ditch attempts to cling on to power by any means necessary. In addition, the cynical PR ploy designed in London by Tory linked spin masters out to image process the right wing Jubilee government as a born again anti-imperialist crusader, all aim at the same thing. In the process, the Jubilee coalition is seen as being against a "racist neo-colonial master" sequestered Washington, Whitehall, Brussels, Berlin, Paris and other capitals of Capital. The recent visit by IMF chief Christine Lagarde served as an inconvenient needle to puncture the balloon of self-congratulatory "nationalist" hype when Bretton Woods institution reminded the clique in Nairobi who controls the discourse on Kenyan, African and regional macro-economic discourse.

Conclusion

Despite the political rhetoric against western governments that characterized the initial days of the Jubilee regime, Analysts are increasingly foreshadowing that behind the veneer of neo-colonialism politics statusquo prevails. Given the government's lackluster performance in the first year and the lingering perception that it is least inclusive – a new pre-occupation is quickly emerging that is maneuvering the uncertain political terrain by manipulating the masses.

Kenya remains strategic for its geo-political as well as its vantage point as a sub-imperialist hub dominating the East and Central African economy. This position is further enhanced with the emerging political-military crisis in South Sudan. As such, there is little doubt that sooner or later Nairobi will work out a quiet rapprochement with the very forces it is currently flaying as "foreign oppressors".

Indeed, the expanding class interests of the Jubilee regime will sooner, rather than later, lead to an accommodation between the current Kenyan elite in power and with those it has traditionally done business with. Even Obama's administration is likely to wait while it works out a security intelligence arrangement with the Jubilee regime, united by their joint concern about the deepening menace of Al Shabaab linked terror cells-which of late have attracted a growing number of radicalized youthful recruits in Mombasa, Nairobi and Northern Kenya.

In all these cases, Beijing will continue being a strategic ally of the Kenyan regime and all subsequent incarnations of the same. The Kenyan elite-which consist of comprador bourgeois elements which thrive on tenderpreneurship, cronyism, tribal ties and corrupt back room deals, will see in Chinese firms that can be accessed for the billions these elites need to stay in power for decades.

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Endnotes:

- 1) <http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Uhuru-signs-Sh425bn-financing-deals-with-Chinese-government-/-/539546/1960182/-/v4w55o/-/index.html>
- 2) <http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Uhuru-signs-Sh425bn-financing-deals-with-Chinese-government-/-/539546/1960182/-/v4w55o/-/index.html>
- 3) <http://allafrica.com/stories/201312150039.html>
- 4) African Perspectives of China in Africa, Pambazuka Press, 2007 pp 139-152.
- 5) Ibid. pp 66-7.
- 6) World Orders, Development and Transformation, Dr. Eunice Njeri Sahle, Palgrave McMillan (2008), pp 109-144.