

France-China Cooperation in Africa: The Emergence and the Limits of a New Initiative

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Abstract

France and China have often been perceived as economic and political competitors in Africa. However, since 2013, both countries have demonstrated a clearer willingness to cooperate on this continent, in order to better address its economic, political and security challenges. A regular governmental dialogue has been established aimed at identifying and implementing areas in which not only French and Chinese government agencies but also private economic or social actors of both countries can cooperate.

This paper will focus on the current areas of cooperation between France and China in Africa. Since the June 2015 Franco-Chinese Joint Statement, both governments have decided to rely on their respective business community to facilitate cooperation. As a result, this cooperation has concentrated on specific areas as the development of infrastructure or health. These areas are likely to expand and diversify in the coming years. However, for a number of economic, political and security reasons, this cooperation will inevitably face limits and obstacles. This paper will attempt therefore to better assess both the emergence and the limits of France-China cooperation in Africa.

Introduction

France and China have often been perceived as staunch competitors in Africa, particularly in the former French colonies. And many actors of both countries stationed or active in Africa still strongly feel this competition and hardly see any possible or potential areas of cooperation. At the same time, today France and China face identical economic, political and security challenges there: poverty, deficient infrastructures and utilities, lack of skilled workers, bad governance, corruption, fragile states and the risks attached to increasing terrorist activities, just to name a few. While defending their own economic, political and security interests, both countries also claim to pursue similar objectives in contributing to

Africa's economic development, job creation, infrastructure construction and health protection. And although France is much more involved in Africa's security as it is linked to many of its former colonies by bilateral defense agreements and still holds military bases in several African countries, China has demonstrated in the last few years a stronger interest in African security. With one to two million nationals living in Africa, the Chinese government has been more and more concerned with security issues and consular protection. In this respect, the evacuation of some 36,000 Chinese from Libya in 2011 constituted a wakeup call for Beijing. And since then, China has increased its participation in United Nations Peace-Keeping Operations (PKOs) on the continent and, after much internal debates, opened in 2015 its first logistical naval base in the strategically-located port-state of Djibouti.

As the French-Chinese partnership was deepening under the presidency of Jacques Chirac (1995-2007), becoming "global" in 1997 and "strategic global" in 2004, a high-level "strategic dialogue" was established. And since then, this dialogue has included both bilateral and global issues, and among them Africa has become a significant theme.¹

Asked about his view of China's growing influence in Africa, Jacques Chirac once famously declared: "Welcome! I am delighted by China's activities in Africa and by this new bond between China and Africa."² For him, there are enough opportunities and needs in this continent for more than one partner; but going further, as his then spokesman indicated: "The president is persuaded that part of France's influence and status in the world will depend on its ability to build a particularly strong relationship with China".³ Since then, Africa has become one of the important discussion items between French and Chinese government officials but no idea of concrete cooperation had materialized until very recently.

The Origins of France-China Cooperation in Africa

According to French government sources, it is Beijing which expressed the willingness to cooperate with France in Africa and Paris quickly decided to accept this initiative and jointly draft a plan. More precisely, according to the same sources, no other than the Chinese President Xi Jinping himself directly made this proposal to François Hollande on the occasion of the French president's first visit to China in April 2013. Although not confirmed by Chinese sources, this is likely since Xi had then just returned from his first trip abroad that had led him not only to Russia but also to three important China's partners in Africa:

¹ "France-Chine: un partenariat pour l'avenir", Paris, Ministère des Affaires étrangères, November 2010, p. 3 ; http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/France_Chine_BAT_Light18_10_2010.pdf (accessed on 26 February 2016).

² Statement made at the France-Africa Summit in Cannes in October 2007, Le Figaro, 15 October 2007, http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2007/02/17/01003-20070217ARTFIG90746-sommet_france_afrique_chirac_salue_le_role_de_la_chine.php

³ Chirac's spokesman Jérôme Bonnafont declared during the French president fourth trip to China in October 2006: "Le président est persuadé qu'une partie de l'influence et de la place de la France dans le monde de demain va dépendre de son aptitude à construire avec la Chine une relation particulièrement forte", quoted in *L'Express*, 25 October 2006, http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/chine-chirac-dans-son-meilleur-role_460898.html

Tanzania, South Africa and Congo-Brazzaville.⁴ What Xi exactly said remains uncertain but the idea was to offer France to cooperate in Africa not only in the economic and development assistance fields but also on security matters as well as to take advantage of and better share each side's strengths and opportunities.

Chinese scholars tend to question this explanation, arguing that it is Paris which first made this initiative and that Beijing just followed suit and accepted the idea.⁵

In any event, the idea matured and became public on the occasion of Xi Jinping's first state visit to France in March 2014. At the end of this visit, a joint declaration was issued that included these important objectives:

“(4.) Strengthen dialogue and cooperation on development issues, particularly in Africa, support the realization of the Millennium Development Objectives and intensify consultations and coordination during the drafting of the post-2015 International Development Agenda and when defining sustainable development objectives. Encourage long-term funding projects of infrastructures. Promote multilateral development banks' resources and, when guaranteeing their solidity, increase their financial leverage.”⁶

And in his own speech, Hollande then declared: “China is present in Africa. She invests there. She contributes to (Africa's) development. I wish that France and Africa can act together, because Africa is a continent of the future. We must fight against terrorism, but we must also get mobilized for the African continent's development and growth.”⁷

Made on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between France and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in January 1964, these statements were part of a larger mid-term and long-term plan aimed at boosting the Franco-Chinese bilateral “global strategic partnership” to a new level. Having said that, as far as Africa is concerned, Paris and Beijing were willing to cooperate both in the economic and security realms, although economic cooperation should clearly be a priority, at least in the eyes of the French president and his administration.

Consequently, asked by the *Global Times* in September 2014, a few days after his arrival in Beijing, about the possibility of France-China cooperation in third markets, the new French Ambassador to China, Maurice Gourdeau-Montagne unsurprisingly declared:

⁴ A Chinese senior journalist told *Le Monde* that Hollande had mentioned Africa to Xi and added that China was not trying to establish “exclusive relations” there and was much more open to cooperation than many people think, *Le Monde*, 27 April 2013, http://www.lemonde.fr/asi-pacifique/article/2013/04/27/la-visite-de-francois-hollande-rassure-la-chine_3167655_3216.html

⁵ He Wenping, “Les coopérations tripartites ‘France-Chine-Afrique’” (Triangular cooperations France-China-Africa), oral presentation, Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, 27 January 2016.

⁶ Joint Statement, 27 March 2014, <http://www.ambafrance-cn.org/Declaration-conjointe-entre-la-Republique-populaire-de-Chine-et-la-Republique-francaise-adoptee-par> (accessed 26 February 2016).

⁷ François Hollande's speech, 26 March 2014, <http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?fichier=bafr2014-03-27.html#Chapitre2>

“I would mention Africa. China is investing in Africa, which is welcomed by Africa. France has strong positions in Africa because of her history with the continent. We know Africa quite well. Wouldn't it be possible for the two countries to work together in Africa, for instance in the field of health against infectious diseases? Or in the fields of logistics, infrastructure and in agriculture? Africa is the continent of the future, and countries which are committed like China and France can do a lot in Africa for the well-being of Africa. Let's be bold.”⁸

Xi Jinping had probably been informed about this comment since a few days later when Gourdeau-Montagne presented to him his credentials, the Chinese president evoked Africa as a continent where both countries could cooperate, mentioning more specifically as an example the fight against Ebola in West Africa.⁹

Economic cooperation and soft security matters were obviously taking the lead in bilateral discussions. As a result, both sides negotiated the drafting of a joint statement concentrating exclusively on these themes. The negotiation took some time—over a year—as the bilateral relationship was dominated by other issues, including the various celebrations of the 50th anniversary and the preparation of the COP21 summit due to take place in Paris in December 2015, but also because both sides wanted to prepare an ambitious and rather comprehensive statement. In any event, a long statement was approved and made public in June 2015 on the occasion of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to France.

France-China Partnership in Third Markets

The 30 June 2015 Joint Statement

In many ways, titled “France-China Partnership in Third Markets”, this joint statement signed by Li Keqiang and his French counterpart Emmanuel Valls on 30 June 2015 fleshed out the objectives set by both presidents more than a year earlier.¹⁰ This ambitious document first states:

“The world community must continue to show solidarity, actively push forward structural reforms and initiate innovative cooperation methods, in order to support a robust, shared and inclusive world economic growth. France and China have an important responsibility (to

⁸ *Global Times*, 26 September 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/883553.shtml>

⁹ French diplomatic sources; The ambassadors of Niger, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire were among the nine new ambassadors received by Xi on that day, cf. “Chinese President Xi Accepts Credentials from Foreign Ambassadors”, 15 October 2014, <http://newscontent.cctv.com/NewJsp/news.jsp?fileId=264784> (accessed on 26 February 2016)

¹⁰ “Déclaration conjointe entre le gouvernement de la République française et le gouvernement de la République populaire de Chine sur le partenariat franco-chinois en marchés tiers”, Paris, 30 June 2015, http://www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/document/document/2015/07/declaration_franco-chinoise-partenariat-marches-tiers_1.pdf, the Chinese statement (中华人民共和国政府和法兰西共和国政府关于第三方市场合作的联合声明) is dated 1 July 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679134/1207_679146/t1277670.shtml

achieve these goals). Both countries must together play an active role in stabilizing the relaunching of the world economy, favor the developments of the different regions of the world and support the developing countries in the implementation of the United Nations' post-2015 Development Program.”

As this statement's title suggests, both countries are open to establish partnerships in every developing countries. However, in the main body of this document, it is clearly indicated that priority will be given to Asia and Africa. And as we will see, on the French side, but also to a large extent on the Chinese side, the understanding has been from the very beginning that Africa will be the main object of this new “partnership in third markets”.

More specifically, this joint statement proposes the following *modus operandi*:

“France and China are willing to encourage and support both countries' companies in their effort to initiate or strengthen partnerships in third markets”... in conformity with the following four types of principles:

- 1) enterprises must take the leading role while governments play only a supportive and coordinating role;
- 2) “win-win cooperation”: priority should be given to “structuring projects” that strengthen regional integration; each country's characteristics, development needs as well as economic strategies and objectives should be taken into account; France-China proposals should address third countries' priorities. Partnerships will be chosen together with third countries and carried out in full agreement with them in associating them to their realization and the benefits that they will generate. Projects with strong local content, improving the people's welfare, creating local jobs, generating growth and fighting against climate change will be prioritized.
- 3) “Complementarity, mutual advantages, openness and inclusiveness”: co-contracting, co-production and co-financing should replace traditional sub-contracting; projects can be developed not only by the private sector but also by public industrial and financial companies.
- 4) Joint projects should promote environmental and social norms as well as protect ecosystems and natural resources; both countries “will pay great attention to the partner countries' financial sustainability as well as the strengthening of their public management and governance capacities, while respecting their sovereignty.”

In other words, both governments should support their economic actors and encourage them to cooperate on projects that innovate, create jobs, contribute to promoting regional integration and fighting against global warming, while at the same time respecting all the established or accepted principles in terms of good governance, enterprises' social responsibility principles and environmental protection. More importantly perhaps, these projects must be selected on the basis of the priorities expressed by African partners; and both countries should prioritize projects with a strong local component.

These accepted principles are clearly aimed at addressing some of the most common criticism made against Chinese projects in Africa: non-respect of local labor or environmental laws,

heavy reliance on Chinese technicians and workers, lack of transfer of technology, loan allocations that dangerously feed debt, practices that aggravate local corruption and bad governance. At the same time, in support of China's interests and policy these principles endorse the role of state-owned enterprises or financial institutions and refer to the need to respect African countries' sovereignty. This latter principle may be also read as a veiled criticism of France's penchant (or perceived need, particularly in times of crisis) to interfere in the internal affairs of some of its former colonies.

More specifically, both countries intend to cooperate in the following eight jointly identified sectors: infrastructures and energy, sales of jointly manufactured aircrafts, transportations and in particular railways, agriculture, health and infectious diseases, renewable energies, added-value projects in industrial parks, finance and insurance.

While both parties emphasize the role of government, and to a lesser extent think-tanks, civil societies actors and multilateral organizations (as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Asia Development Bank, the OECD's DAC, see *infra*) in spurring bilateral cooperation in third countries, it is up to French and Chinese companies to establish such partnerships.

In other words, the objective of this new partnership is clearly economic. As we have seen, the joint statement refers to "markets" rather than countries. This partnership aims at joining forces in order to mitigate the impact of the world economic slowdown and better take advantage of Africa and (to a lesser extent) Asia growth potential. This partnership also has political implications that we will try to assess later.

France and China's Motivations

Nevertheless, France and China's motivations for establishing this partnership partly differ and may limit and even compromise its success.

France's major objective is to stop losing market shares in Africa to the benefit of China. The reasoning goes more or less as follows: China and Chinese companies have money or easy means of funding (e.g. concessional loans from the Exim Bank and China Development Bank), cheaper equipment and products; we have expertise, more sophisticated technologies and a better knowledge of Africa. As a matter of fact, French actors often claim to know Africa better, its societies, its traditions, its political elites, particularly in France's former colonies. Moreover, French companies have also been active in English or Portuguese-speaking African countries usually for a longer time than China.

The selected sectors of cooperation give some indications of France's goals in Africa: regain some ground in the construction of infrastructures, sell Airbuses partly manufactured in China, participate in China's ambitious railway projects in providing the most sophisticated part of them, as for instance the signaling systems, take advantage of France's expertise in agriculture or infectious diseases to expand, in cooperation with China, its role in these sectors and be better positioned to keep its renewable energy industries present and competitive on the continent.

In other words, as François Barateau, the new ambassador specially in charge of the France-China Partnership in Africa indicated in February 2016: “France and China share common interests in Africa to work together and with Africans, in a responsible manner, where it is possible and appropriate, in the sectors where respective advantages can be valorized and each side weaknesses can be reduced, and on structuring projects that contribute to the economic and social emergence of the continent.”¹¹

Having said that, France’s second objective is also to better integrate Chinese companies in the African landscape in convincing them, through cooperation, to abide by corporate social responsibility and environmental protection standards and principles. The idea is also to encourage Chinese economic actors in Africa to train and rely more on the local workforce, invest and create more jobs in the manufacturing sector as well as favor regional integration. It is finally, as the joint statement indicates, to more closely associate China to the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and hopefully convince her to adopt similar official development assistance (ODA) criteria as the developed countries.

However, it is easy to perceive in this statement France’s hidden objective: convincing Chinese companies operating in Africa to introduce stricter social and environmental standards, and, as a result, increase their production costs and improve the competitiveness of her own enterprises.

On the Chinese side, conversely, it seems that the major objective is to take advantage of France’s better knowledge of Africa’s markets and societies to cooperate and, in so doing, improve an image that has been partly damaged in the last decade by practices that have been briefly listed above as well as by the social and human distance that many Chinese companies have maintained with the host countries’ civil society, political opposition and NGOs. Chinese companies expects also from this partnership to gain new market shares in Africa and at the same time get access to better technologies and know-hows.

More generally, this decision to cooperate with France has been made on the backdrop of China’s increasing difficulties and challenges in Africa, leading Li Keqiang to refer in May 2014 on the occasion of his first trip as Prime Minister there to the “growing pains” that his country was facing as it was deepening its relationship with this continent.¹² A few weeks later, the governor of China’s central bank Zhou Xiaochuan admitted that “different entities have behaved differently. They may have been phenomena of Chinese investors (that were) not so good, not so satisfactory”. More importantly, he made these comments after he signed a US\$2 billion deal with the African Development Bank, indicating a willingness to

¹¹ Speech made at the “1st meeting of Comité France-Chine and MEDEF (Mouvement des Entreprises de France) International on the France-China Partnership in Third Country: Focus Africa”. François Barateau was appointed “Ambassadeur Chargé de mission auprès du Directeur d’Afrique et de l’Océan Indien en charge du Partenariat franco-chinois en Afrique” in July 2015 after he completed a four year term as ambassador to Equatorial Guinea.

¹² *Xinhua*, 7 May 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-05/07/c_126473781.htm

cooperate with other parties and open contracts to the most suitable bidder rather than just Chinese companies.¹³

Having said that, on the one hand, this partnership is far from being exclusive as the example just given underscores. China has been trying to cooperate with various developed countries in Africa, including the United States. And Chinese experts are often inclined to underscore in front of their French interlocutors the scope and benefits of China's cooperation with the United Kingdom on this continent, in areas such as development assistance or health, as an incentive to convince France to do more.¹⁴

On the other hand, this new partnership is seen by China as part of its "One Belt, One Road" initiative and should directly contribute not only to enhancing the connectivity between China and Europe but also to serving its economic and trade interests in Africa and elsewhere.¹⁵

Of course, China (as the joint statement) has described her new partnership with France in "third markets" as a win-win initiative.¹⁶ However, motivations on both sides differ to such an extent that we may express some doubts about its future success.

The Joint Statement's Slow Implementation

In order to achieve these objectives, as early as July 2015, as indicated above (cf. footnote 11), a ambassadorial rank diplomat attached to the Africa Desk of the French Foreign Ministry was specially appointed to manage the France-China Partnership in Africa. His very title highlights the African focus on this partnership. Then, on 2 September 2015, the French Prime Minister officially proposed in a letter sent to Li Keqiang the organization of a triangular economic meeting France – China – Africa in Dakar in the first half of 2016. On 30 September 2015, Li Keqiang accepted in principle this proposal that he qualified as a "strategic initiative".¹⁷

On 30 July 2015, the Senegalese Prime Minister had already expressed his support to the French initiative and to "a strengthened mobilization of the economic actors around structural projects which have high added values for all the parties involved."¹⁸

At the end of October in Paris, the Senegalese president Macky Sall and the French Prime Minister confirmed the importance of the Dakar meeting. The Senegal Ambassador Bassirou

¹³ *Financial Times*, 23 May 2014, p. 2.

¹⁴ Interview with Chinese Africa experts, Beijing, December 2015.

¹⁵ 中国驻法大使翟隽接受欧洲时报专访：新年纵论中法关系，*法国中国工商会*，27 January 2016, http://www.aecf-france.org/guide_biz_185.htm; 毛雨（中国人民大学国际关系学院）“中法打造第三方市场合作标杆”，*中国社会科学报*，16 July 2015, http://www.cssn.cn/bk/bkpd_qklm/bkpd_bkwz/201507/t20150731_2103220.shtml

¹⁶ 董天美（中国人民大学国家发展与战略研究院助理研究员），“中法如何在非洲建立立体合作”，*凤凰评论*，2 July 2015, http://news.ifeng.com/a/20150702/44083249_0.shtml

¹⁷ Quoted by Barateau, cf. note 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Sene then declared: “France and China must work in complementarity and not in confrontation in Africa. Suspicions need to be dissolved.”¹⁹

The Establishment of a Bilateral Investment Fund

On his side, Li Keqiang proposed Valls to create a bilateral investment fund designed to finance joint project in third markets. Negotiations have been conducted since October 2015 by the Direction Générale du Trésor (General Directorate of the Treasury), a powerful bureau of the Finance Ministry on the French side, and the National Development and Reform Commission, on the Chinese side, and are still going on at the time of writing.

Considered as “complex” on the French side, these negotiations have actually underscored the gap in financial capabilities on both sides: while Beijing was ready to inject US\$5 to 10 billion in this fund with the participation of the China Investment Corporation, its sovereign wealth fund, the French Finance Ministry was much more modest in its intention, mentioning the establishment of a “symbolic” amount of several millions dollars. Later, other sources mentioned a fund of 2 billion Euros that would be partly provided on the French side by the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignation (CDC or Deposits and Consignments Fund), a state financial institution that manages and reinvests saving accounts and builds social housings.²⁰ In any case, for Paris, this fund is not aimed at directly financing projects but rather at stimulating intergovernmental projects and private investments particularly in the African industrial parks. Once set up, it will be managed by a bilateral governmental team that will scrutinize the return on investment and the sustainability of all projects.²¹

On 19 November 2015, the French government sent a first draft of its intentions (“*premières orientations*”) regarding the Dakar meeting to its Chinese counterpart, via the French Embassy in Beijing. However, since then, Paris has been waiting for an answer that has yet to come.

The Africa – France – China Dakar Economic Conference

France has been actively pushing for the organization of the Dakar meeting, which it now proposes to call “Africa – France – China Dakar Economic Conference” (Conférence économique Afrique – France – Chine de Dakar). And it is hoping that the negotiation around the creation of the above-mentioned bilateral investment fund will not slowdown its preparation. However, initially planned for end of May early June 2016 (just before the Ramadan which starts on 6 June), the Dakar Conference has been postponed until September, at the request of Beijing.

Enterprises should be the key actors of this conference. It will be open to the whole African continent, including the English-speaking and Portuguese-speaking countries, as well as the Maghreb region. In Paris’ eyes, it is Africa which invites China and France on its soil. Consequently, Senegal should be given a major role. Enterprises (both private and public)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Interview with a French Finance Ministry official, February 2016.

²¹ Interview, Direction générale du Trésor, French Finance Ministry, December 2015.

will be selected and invited by the three organizing parties. Regional development banks as well as institutional actors (as the Agence Française de Développement or AFD) should also be invited. The objective is to gather around 1,000 participants.

This conference's main objective is to give a "strong political visibility and decisive operational impulsion" to the France-China partnership in third markets. It will be its "first visible and concrete manifestation" and aim at encouraging effective partnerships between Chinese, French and African enterprises and convince them to work together "in a spirit of complementarity" while abiding by high social and environmental standards. For the French government, the number of B 2 B (business-to-business) meetings and initiated or approved partnerships will be the true indicators of the Dakar Conference's success. This conference should finally contribute to speeding up the establishment of the above-mentioned bilateral investment fund.²²

On the French side, the MEDEF International, France's Federation of Enterprises, will be the sole operator of the Dakar Conference. Its funding will be mixed, made of enterprises' and governmental contributions, sponsoring while Senegal will provide the logistical support. The French government has also proposed that the conference concentrates on three major sectors only: agriculture, sustainable energies and infrastructures, while technical and vocational training will be selected as a key component.

Since November 2015, the French government has been the main promoter of this conference. It convinced the MEDEF International to organize on 15 February 2016 its "1st meeting on the "France-China Partnership in Third Country: Focus Africa" and invite some Chinese business representatives to it. Among the speakers, in addition to François Barateau were China's Ambassador to France Zhai Jun and Asia Desk Director Emmanuel Lenain who both made very enthusiastic concluding remarks.²³ Zhai's presence was indicative of China's support for the project. Some 160 French companies and around 20 Chinese enterprises were represented. But more importantly was the presence, among the roundtable participants, of two Chinese company executives: Zhou Sheng, director general of China State Construction and Engineering Company (CSCEC) in Algeria and Wu Jianhua, president of Sanei Elevator. The three French participants of the roundtable were Jérémy Rubel, director of Gannibal, Alexandre Maymat, Africa director of Société Générale and Benoît Miribel, director general of the Fondation Mérieux.

What has come out of this meeting is an awareness of the growing globalization of projects in Africa and the increasing opportunities of cooperation among enterprises that also compete in the same sectors of activities (see below).

A second meeting is planned in the coming months and should this time invite representatives of the African private sector. This appears today as the necessary next step before the organization of the Dakar Conference.

²² Barateau, op. cit.

²³ "驻法国大使翟隽在中法第三方市场合作——‘聚焦非洲’研讨会上的讲话", Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 17 February 2016, <http://www.focac.org/chn/zxxx/t1341182.htm>

The Dakar Conference is now likely to take place in the second half of 2016. According to French sources, Ambassador Zhong Jianhua, China's special representative for Africa, has already accepted to participate in it. But the real question is whether this conference will reach the ambitious objectives set by both governments. More generally, do French and Chinese companies need the active support of their government to cooperate? And will the enterprise- or project-level cooperation helps both countries to work together in other areas as good governance or security?

Cases of Partnerships

Long before the adoption of the 2015 joint statement, French and Chinese companies had for a long time cooperated, while at the same time continued to compete, in Africa. This cooperation has mainly been project-centered and logically motivated by perceived shared interest. Cases abound. The cooperation since 2011 between Total, Tullow (UK) and CNOOC in exploring then exploiting natural oil and gas in Lake Albert (Uganda) constitutes just a successful example among many.

Scope and Limits of Cooperation

French companies which have been for a long time active in China are more prone to cooperate with Chinese enterprises in Africa. For instance, the French company Alstom, which has been involved for three decades in China's railways development, is interested in working with Chinese railway companies in Africa and selling them its rail technologies (catenaries, signals, etc.). Alstom already cooperates with several big Chinese companies: for example, in February 2015, it was chosen by Sinohydro to provide six turbine-generators and technical services for the Karuma Hydropower Project, Uganda's largest electricity plant. This is the third contract awarded by Sinohydro to Alstom after a successful cooperation in the Bui hydropower project in Ghana and in the Soubre project in Côte d'Ivoire.²⁴

In the banking sector, Société Générale, which is the top private bank in West Africa and Algeria, has taken advantage of China's growing presence in Africa to set up in 2011 a "China Desk" and offer since then specific services to clients related to China as commercial transactions in yuan.

However, these examples also show that in the context of globalization, French and Chinese companies have naturally become suppliers and clients but do not necessarily cooperate and more precisely bid together on the same project. Large French infrastructure companies as Vinci and Lafarge (cements), or firms as Schneider Electric, Alcatel and Saint-Gobain (glass) have been part of Chinese enterprises' supply chain in many countries, for instance of CSCEC in Algeria (Alger Airport). But they still tend to see their Chinese counterparts as major competitors.

²⁴ <http://www.alstom.com/press-centre/2015/2/alstom-to-supply-hydropower-turbine-generators-to-ugandas-largest-electricity-plant/> (accessed on 1 March 2016).

A Successful Case: France-China-Mali Joint Research on New Viruses

In that context, the triangular cooperation initiated in 2015 between the Mérieux Foundation and the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences in Mali is an exceptional case.

On the one hand, created in 1967 by Charles Mérieux to pay homage to his father Marcel Mérieux, the founder of the Mérieux Institute, a holding company based in Lyons and famous for its vaccines, the Mérieux Foundation established a branch in Bamako, Mali, in 2003: it then created the Centre d'Infectiologie Charles Mérieux (CICM), concentrating, as this center's name indicates, on the study of infectious diseases. On the other hand, the Mérieux Foundation has developed a close relationship with the PRC since 1965 and established in 2005 a joint laboratory on respiratory diseases with and at the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences (CAMS) in Beijing.²⁵ In other words, the Mérieux Foundation has connections both in China and in Africa.

Consequently, after the joint statement was signed by Li Keqiang and Emmanuel Valls, it was easy for the Foundation to quickly move forward and propose a triangular cooperation project: on 17 September 2015, it signed a joint agreement both with the Malian Health Ministry and the CAMS to develop a joint research on “emerging pathogens” in Africa. Less than a month later, on 6 October, another agreement was signed in Cape Town between the CIMC and CAMS' Institute of Biological Pathogens (IBP) on the margin of the Second Ministerial Forum on China-Africa Health Development.²⁶ The objective of this one year but renewable accord is to share data and jointly research on the pathogens carried by bats and rodents and, as a result, better understand the new viruses including the ones provoking respiratory diseases. The IBP has already completed a large study of the bats and rodents in China and will allow researchers involved in this project to compare their findings with the IBP's. Conversely, the IBP and the CAMS will directly benefit from this joint research and enhance their understanding of new viruses in Africa. The Ebola crisis (2013-2016) has stimulated China's research in this area and at a high political level in Beijing the decision was made to establish closer partnerships with foreign institutions in order to accelerate its development. The creation by the Foundation in 2009 of a “Réseau Gabriel” (Gabriel Network) including both China's IBP and Mali's CICM and Xi Jinping's visit of the Mérieux Institute in Lyons in March 2014 both facilitated the initiation of this joint research project.²⁷

Although French researchers are not directly involved in this research, its results will be presented at the Mérieux Foundation in Lyon at the end of the first year. One of the key objectives of this project is to train more Malians and enhance Mali's capacity to identify viruses in a country which neighbors the countries affected by Ebola and where 40% of fevers have still unknown origins.²⁸

²⁵ On the history of Mérieux's cooperation with China, cf. the video presentation in French and in Chinese, <http://www.biomerieux.com/fr/notre-histoire> (accessed on 2 March 2016).

²⁶ The Forum approved a Declaration that calls for enhancing Sino-African health cooperation, cf. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/chinahealth/2015-10/06/content_22117522.htm (accessed 2 March 2016).

²⁷ <http://www.fondation-merieux.org/reseau-gabriel> (accessed on 2 March 2016)

²⁸ Visit of the CICM and meeting with its managers, February 2016.

Other Areas of Cooperation

In other areas of research as development assistance, contacts have been established for some time. For instance, in 2004, the AFD, France Development Agency, a state institution, opened an office in Beijing. And since then, the AFD has organized in Paris and in Beijing a number of conferences involving ODA officials, economists and social scientists from Europe (France, Germany and United Kingdom in particular), China and Africa. However, cooperation has mainly remained bilateral, either with China or with African countries and partners.

Some French academics have been active in stimulating exchanges with both Chinese and African experts on China-Africa relations. Among them Thierry Pairault, Jean-Jacques Gabas and Xavier Aurégan have held since 2010 regular seminars at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (School of High Studies in Social Sciences) in Paris. Some as Gabas have developed joint research projects with Chinese colleagues, particularly on Chinese agricultural projects, in Africa. Nevertheless, again cases of joint field works are still too few, most projects being limited to conferences and publications.

Limits and Obstacles to Partnership

One can identify many limits and obstacles to this new France-China partnership in “third markets” and particularly in Africa. Firstly, it is a political decision initiated by both governments but which heavily relies on the business community. In Africa as elsewhere, French and Chinese companies or research centers will cooperate if, when and where they have an interest to do so only. But in most cases, they will keep competing. And the field work that I have conducted since 2012 in several French-speaking African countries (Benin, Cameroun, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Togo) tend to demonstrate that competition is fierce and will continue to overwhelm cooperation in most places and sectors.²⁹ In other words, both governments recognize that cooperating in Africa requires a change of mindset of the part of most of the actors involved.³⁰

Secondly, the 2015 Joint Statement submits all joint projects to many economic, environmental, social and good governance conditions that can amount to as many disincentives for French and Chinese companies to cooperate. As we have seen, they have been cases of cooperation way before this Joint Statement was signed. But in the majority of the eight identified sectors of cooperation, one can only wonder whether both countries' enterprises have not a bigger interest to continue to compete rather than to cooperate.

²⁹ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, “China-Cameroon Relations: Fortunes and Limits of an Old Political Complicity”, *South Africa Journal of International Affairs*, 2015, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 67-91 and “Gabon-China Relations: Towards a More Cautious Partnership”, *African East-Asian Affairs*, Issue 2, June 2014, pp. 6-37. <http://aeaa.journals.ac.za/pub/index>

³⁰ Barateau, op. cit.

Thirdly, within the French government, I have sensed that this initiative is far from being unanimously approved and implemented. Seen by President Hollande, Prime Minister Valls and then Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius as a leverage to boost Franco-Chinese relations and increase our market share in China (and reduce our trade deficit) it has immediately provoked negative reactions among the Foreign Ministry's "Africanists" who feel that, in view of China's growing problems in Africa, it would damage rather than strengthen France's image in Africa. This view has been confirmed to me by a number of French diplomats posted in West and Central Africa. Said differently, a lot of French public and private actors in Africa assume that China has a bad image in Africa, even if Chinese officials, for instance the Chinese ambassador to France Zhai Jun, claim the opposite.³¹

Within the Finance Ministry and the Direction du Trésor, reservations about this triangular cooperation are partly similar (Chinese enterprises' bad image in Africa) and partly different: the long-term risks for French companies to cooperate with their Chinese competitors and the likelihood of being sidelined or even evicted from the African market as a result; and this Ministry's difficulty to find money to finance the Franco-Chinese investment fund.

Fourthly, there is a feeling on the French side, that China's enthusiasm to cooperate with France in Africa and implement the 2015 Joint Statement has cooled down. The postponement of the Dakar Economic Conference to September 2016 is the first sign of it. But there are other indices of a weakening interest. French informers told me that at the first China-Africa Business Entrepreneurs Summit held in Marrakech in July 2015, Chinese participants repeatedly indicated that they did not need France and French companies to develop business and succeed in Africa.³² Chinese researchers tend also to deny that this triangular cooperation was first initiated by China, turning the table, and putting the French side in an awkward position. And Zhong Jianhua told me in Lagos, Nigeria in March 2016 that France-China cooperation in Africa still "requires a lot of work as the three parties need to sit down and work on it", particularly as far as each party's contribution would be, adding: "there is still a long way to go".³³

Finally, this cooperation has been limited by both governments to the economic and social realms. Although some projects as the Mérieux case can contribute to improving soft security, hard security cooperation has been excluded from the 2015 Joint Statement. True, France is satisfied of China's official support of its military operations in Mali and the Central African Republic. However, the French Defense Ministry has not developed any bilateral cooperation with China in Africa and is apparently unwilling to do so, perceiving more Beijing as a competitor (on arms sales) and an intruder (for instance in Djibouti) than a partner.³⁴ Since the summer 2013, French and Chinese troops have participated under the banner of the United Nations in the stabilization of Mali (the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali or Minusma) but it is part of a wider and multilateral mission in which dozens of national contingents are involved. And the

³¹ Cf. note 23.

³² Interview with French Finance Ministry officials, Paris, December 2015.

³³ Interview with Ambassador Zhong Jianhua, Lagos Business School, Nigeria, 17 March 2016.

³⁴ Interview with French Defense Ministry officials, Paris, January 2016.

bulk of French troops (3,500 soldiers) are part of Operation Barkhane, France's main counterterrorist operation in Africa, that has been active in five Sahel countries (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso) from N'Djamena, Chad, since the end of the Operation Serval in 2014. And while the French government did not try to prevent Djibouti from negotiating an agreement with China's Defense Ministry (mainly because it does not want to see its rent of the Camp Lemonnier increase), it is nearly as uneasy about the opening of this Chinese logistic naval base as the US and Japan, also present there.

This is not to say that France would be opposed to sharing the burden of Africa's security with other countries, including China since Chinese companies and migrant benefit from the security guarantees that France is still providing to a number of African countries. But in this area, Paris is keener to cooperate with Washington (which for instance now has drone bases in Niger) and its European allies than Beijing. And at this stage, it is hard to conceive how France and China could cooperate on African defense and security outside of the UN Peace-Keeping Operation framework.

Conclusion

Today, both France and China are present and active in Africa, the former for a long time, the latter on a much bigger scale than ten or fifteen years ago. Simultaneously, Africa is developing and changing rapidly, being often presented as the next major factor (after China and East Asia) of world economic growth. At the same time, Africa is still riddled with multiple security, political and social challenges. Consequently, there are many reasons for France and China, which both are permanent members of the UN Security Council, to talk to each other and to cooperate. But the irony is that cooperation between French and Chinese enterprises seems harder to organize than cooperation at the governmental level. Because again it depends of each company's interests and mid- and long-term strategies. French and Chinese companies which have already established some cooperation in China and France are more prone to work together in Africa. But do they need the mobilization and the support of their respective government? Is the Dakar Economic Conference really useful?

The author of these lines has some doubt about the ability and the role of political authorities in favoring synergies among economic or even social actors. Without being a libertarian or even a neo-liberal, business and social actors (as NGOs) from different countries know better than their governments when they need to cooperate or, on the contrary, to compete. I fully understand that there are concerns in France to let China taking the upper hand in Africa. And the Dakar Conference can marginally help a number of French and Chinese companies, particularly small and medium size enterprises to know each other and possibly cooperate. But there are also French concerns about mixing up our image and blurring the content as well as the contours of our Africa policy and political message. The same applies to China which promotes its own Africa strategy around the FOCAC, the 'One Belt, One Road' strategy and sometimes together with the BRICS.

In other words, nation-states are ready to cooperate but at the same time want to remain in full control of their foreign policy.

Finally, the 2015 Joint Statement has been careful enough to make the support of our African partners a condition of cooperation. This is wise. But it also raises another issue: is it in African countries' interests to see a former colonizer and a rising power joining forces and working together on a growing number of projects? Won't it give the impression to a number of African governments and societies that Paris and Beijing are ganging up to narrow their room of maneuver? In other words, for African countries, the emergence of a larger number of external actors on their market gives them more options and allow them, at least to some extent, to rebalance in their relations with the developed countries and emerging powers an asymmetry which the latter have for too long taken advantage of, if not abused.

All in all, France and China will cooperate more often in Africa in the coming years, but there is a good chance that both their government and their enterprises will continue to compete on this continent.