

## Chinese clouds over Africa

In the opinion of many Africans, Africa is gradually becoming a Chinese continent. Whereas the former colonial powers focussed on one or two countries, the Chinese influence, like a spider's web, stretches over the whole continent. The Chinese press agency Xinhua and Radio China International went into great detail about the recent journey, early in May, of the Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang to Africa. At the seat of the African Union in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, he agreed to many contracts and promised loans of 12 billion dollars at preferential rates. Sino-African trade stood at 210 billion dollars in 2013 but is expected to reach 400 billion by 2020. The Chinese press also indicated that the volume of direct investments in 2013 amounted to 25 billion and that 2,500 companies were present in Africa, accounting for 100,000 jobs.

Li Keqiang continued his visit in Nairobi, Kenya, where he signed agreements for a regional railway line between the port of Mombasa and Nairobi which will probably later be extended to Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan. If this were to happen it would be a dream come true for all the capitals that would no longer be isolated. With all the infrastructure needed, it would be a gigantic operation that only the Chinese are capable of achieving. As well as railway lines, ports have also been built or improved, particularly by Chinese companies, all over the continent, allowing the rapid export of precious African mineral resources (especially uranium), oil, wood, etc., and the import of large quantities of Chinese products. In his speeches, Li Keqiang recalled that China and Africa were going to strengthen their collaboration in six areas: industry, finance, reduction of poverty, protection of the environment, exchanges between the countries and peace/security. They were working towards cooperation 'Mark 2', continuing the theme of Chinese president Xi Jinping who last year had spoken of their common fraternal destiny. Human Rights are not a priority.

From Kenya, Li Keqiang moved on to Nigeria and Angola. The press agency Xinhua detailed this major strategic partnership and repeatedly confirmed the sincerity, confidence and good faith of the Chinese towards Africa. Admittedly, China does not enjoy a critic-free image and many shadows cloud the sky. As Carlos Rosado, an Angolan professor, said, "China has facilitated a rapid reconstruction of our country after twenty-seven years of civil war, but is also posing problems, among which is the lack of transparency in contracts. We are aware neither of the sums involved nor of the conditions. For example, there is no real system for tendering and this can increase the costs of the work."

So everything is agreed between presidents - which is fine for the elite, as elsewhere. "China is granting loans to Luanda that fund projects taken on by Chinese firms" stated an Angolan entrepreneur who asked the authorities to limit the number of Chinese in order to avoid unhealthy competition from cheap Chinese products. Angola has to export 40% of its oil to China.

In neighbouring Namibia, the same applies for contracts. When the vast uranium mine of Husab was inaugurated on May 8, 200 guests were present at the invitation of President Pohamba, but only eight handpicked journalists who were brought in by coach. A Namibian objected: "Access to the mine was refused, for no good reason, for the longest standing newspaper in Namibia, the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, founded in 1916, a time of South African colonisation when the freedom of the press had been upheld!" The Sino-African 'win-win' partnership wants to muzzle the freedom of the press, everywhere. The Committee to Protect Journalists in the United States has sounded the alarm: "The political and economic interests linked to Chinese investments are eradicating independent journalism in Africa. African journalists covering the development of the continent are increasingly worried for denouncing embezzlement, corruption and various activities of foreign investors. China is also training African journalists who have to focus on collective successes and stimulate public

support for the state.” Furthermore, in the large countries, Angola, South Africa, Namibia and others, Chinese firms are building large, seemingly unnecessary, commercial centres such as Swakopmund in Namibia. Then there is the gigantic Modderfontein Centre eight kilometres from Johannesburg airport which is going to cover an area of 1600 hectares and where 100,000 people will be able to live. There will be all sorts of shops, schools and flats and then, later, parks, stadia, etc. This is giving work to businesses and Chinese workers, and some Africans. Another of its aims is to welcome the Chinese— there are about 250,000 in South Africa most of whom have difficulty integrating – who are looking for better schools for their children in Johannesburg or Pretoria. The statistics given by the Chinese press do not mention the colossal value of the African natural resources that have been exported, nor the number of Chinese immigrants in Africa. It could easily rise to 5 or 6 million, or yet more. At the same time, thousands of young unemployed Africans are trying to emigrate to Europe. China’s aims have been made explicit: to put an end to the western influence in Africa, to establish a south-south ‘cooperation’ and multilateral world governance. But at what price for the peoples of Africa? It’s up to them not to repeat the errors of earlier colonial times.

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