Hu rejects accusations that China has colonial ambitions in Africa

John Chan
15 February 2007

In the course of his recent eight-nation tour of Africa, Chinese President Hu Jintao was forced to rebut a mounting chorus of claims that Beijing was behaving like a colonial power on the continent. The controversy is a significant indicator of China's growing influence in Africa through trade and investment, which is increasingly cutting across the interests of the US and other major powers.

In a keynote address at South Africa's Pretoria University on February 7, Hu answered China's critics. Because of its colonial oppression by the imperialist powers in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he declared, China was "most strongly opposed to colonialism, oppression and slavery of all manifestations."

"China never imposed its will or unequal practices on other countries... It will certainly not do anything harmful to the interests of Africa and its people," Hu said. Despite the recent rapid economic growth, he said, China was still a developing country that shared common interests with Africa. "We believe in cooperation and harmony... and we hold that the strong and the rich should not bully the weak and the poor," he added.

A member of Hu's delegation told the *Financial Times* on February 8 that the Chinese leader had been stung by prominent comments in the South African press by Western officials suggesting that Beijing was developing a colonial relationship with Africa.

China's growing economic activities in Africa are driven by the same motives as its competitors—access to raw materials, cheap labour and profit. Its exploitative methods are provoking significant public hostility in African countries with significant Chinese investment. However, the criticisms of "Western officials" have nothing to with concern for the appalling conditions facing the African working class.

The US and European powers, which have long dominated the African continent, fear China's rapidly expanding influence into their traditional spheres of influence. Hu's trip to Cameroon, Liberia, Sudan, Zambia, Namibia, South Africa, Mozambique and Seychelles followed a similar tour last April. In November, Beijing hosted a lavish Sino-African forum attended by senior government figures from 48 of the 53 African nations.

British International Development Secretary Hillary Benn told reporters last week that London had made its concerns known to Beijing and would "ratchet up" pressure over the cheap Chinese loans to African countries. Such funds, he hypocritically declared, would prop up corrupt dictatorships and undermine Western efforts to improve "human rights" and reduce debt burdens. "We need to talk more to China about how we can work together because we both have the same interests, which are the development of Africa as a continent," he said.

Germany also stepped in last week with a proposal at the G-7 finance ministers' meeting in Essen to undercut China's financial influence by re-establishing Africa's regional bond market. Germany's deputy finance minister, Thomas Mirow, declared the measure would "ensure that these [African] countries do not suddenly find themselves in a new situation of dependence vis-à-vis a lender".

Western imperialism has brutally exploited Africa for centuries with scant regard for "human rights". Throughout the Cold War, the US and its allies relied heavily on "corrupt dictatorships" to ensure their dominant role on the continent. The real concern in London and Berlin is not for the people of Africa, but to counter China's expanding economic role. Having transformed China into the sweatshop of the world, the US and European powers are struggling to cope with the consequences as Beijing seeks out raw materials to feed its industry.

Chinese trade and investment in Africa still lags well behind the US and EU but is increasing rapidly. China's trade with Africa has increased over five-fold since 2000 to $55.5 billion last year. It is now the continent's third largest trading partner after the US and France, ahead of Britain. Although Europe's share of African trade is still three times as much as China's, it has declined from 44 percent to 33 percent of the total in the past decade.

Burkina Faso, for example, had almost no trade with China in 1990s, but now sends a third of its exports, mostly cotton, to China. Last year Angola overtook Saudi Arabia as China's largest oil supplier. China is pushing to double the trade with Africa to $100 billion by 2010. Chinese investment in Africa is a long way behind. In 2004, China accounted for only $900 million of $15 billion in foreign direct investment. By 2005, China's cumulative investment in the continent was only $6.27 billion.

It is China's rapid rise that is destabilising existing economic relations and fuelling fierce rivalry not only in Africa, but also in Latin America, the Pacific and Asia. The sharpest reaction to China's influence has come from the Bush administration, which announced last week its intention to reestablish a separate regional military command for Africa. A Pentagon official told the *Los Angeles Times* that the new Africa Command was not aimed at

China, but nevertheless added: “There needs to be an understanding of what the US role is and what the Chinese role is.”

This militarist response is another indication of the declining US influence in Africa and globally. The *Los Angeles Times* pointed out that the US had been increasing aid to Africa. “So far, however, the Chinese approach, focusing on economic cooperation, appears to be gaining ground. Bush has not visited Africa since his first term. By contrast, top Chinese officials have relayed across the continent every few months, winning points with no-strings-attached promises of economic support,” the article commented.

By establishing an Africa Command, the Bush administration is sending a message to Beijing that the US will counter Chinese influence in Africa by military means if necessary. Already the US has backed the Ethiopian military intervention in Somalia and threatened to intervene in Sudan in the name of protecting refugees from the Darfur region.

In the case of Sudan, China is directly at odds with the US. During his trip, Hu defended the Khartoum government, declaring any solution in Darfur “needs to respect the sovereignty of Sudan and be based on dialogue”. China has used its veto in the UN Security Council to block US and European proposals to deploy UN “peacekeepers” to Darfur.

What is at stake for the US and China is Sudan’s oil. China is Sudan’s largest investor and buys 80 percent of its oil output. During his visit, Hu announced an aid grant of $40 million, an interest-free loan of $12.9 million to build a presidential palace and a $77.4 million loan for infrastructure projects. He also wrote off $70 million in debt to China. To strengthen the pro-Beijing regime, China has supplied arms to the Sudanese forces.

China’s economic activities have also created tensions with the African ruling elites. Last week when he met Hu, South African President Thabo Mbeki praised the burgeoning trade relations between the two countries. Late last year, however, Mbeki also cautiously warned that Africa should guard against China replicating “the historic colonial economic relationship in terms of which Africa served as a source of raw materials and a market for goods manufactured in the countries of colonisers”.

Mbeki was responding to definite domestic concerns. South Africa’s trade with China has surged in recent years, but with a deficit of $3 billion. Local businesses face intense competition from cheap Chinese manufactured goods. To protect the local textile industry, Johannesburg introduced quotas last year to limit the import of Chinese clothing.

There is growing anger among workers over China’s oppressive methods. Two years ago, 49 Zambian workers were killed in an explosion at the Chinese-owned Chambishi copper mine due to lax safety. No compensation was paid to the victims. In 2006, five workers at Chambishi were shot by security guards trying to quell a riot over substandard living conditions.

The case of Zambia underlines the shift in China’s foreign policy. In the 1970s, Chinese leader Mao Zedong authorised the building of a 1,800-kilometre railway to transport Zambia’s mineral exports and established Zambia China Mulungushi—the country’s largest textile factory. Such symbolic projects were aimed at wooing bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Third World, to increase Mao’s leverage in his sordid manoeuvring between the US and Soviet Union.

The embrace of the capitalist market by Mao’s heirs in 1979 brought an end to Beijing’s empty anti-imperialist rhetoric. When Hu was in Lusaka, the Mulungushi factory had just shut down due to competition from cheap Chinese imports. Thousands of workers and cotton farmers lost their livelihoods. After a group of workers threatened to protest against Hu’s visit, the planned launch of a $200 million smelter at a Chinese-owned copper mine was cancelled.

Local political leaders have exploited anti-Chinese sentiment for their own purposes. During last September’s presidential election, Zambian opposition leader Michael Sata appealed for Chinese firms to be driven out of the country. China’s ambassador intervened and threatened to cut off diplomatic ties if Sata won the election. After Sata lost the vote, his supporters rioted in the capital, targeting Chinese businesses.

Guy Scott, the opposition Patriotic Front leader in Zambian parliament, told the British *Guardian*: “People are saying: ‘We’ve had bad people before. The Whites were bad, the Indians were worse but the Chinese are worst of all.’” Former Zambian trade and industry minister, Dipak Patel, commented: “We in Zambia need to be very careful of this new scramble for Africa. What’s happening is that the Chinese are very aggressive. They have a strategic plan.”

These political figures have not the slightest interest in the plight of Zambian workers, but represent the interests of layers of business struggling to compete with Chinese goods. As for the prominent coverage such comments receive in the European press, it should be recalled that the conditions in Chinese factories in Africa only replicate those in the sweatshops in China where the European corporate giants are only too happy to profit from the cheap labour supervised by China’s police state.