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### Article

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## CONTESTING SOVEREIGNTY: CHINESE NONINTERFERENCE AND GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA?

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### Abstract

This study examines the implications of the limited concept of sovereignty that frames China's policy of noninterference for governance in Africa. It argues that while this policy has allowed China to expand its presence in Africa, it has also raised serious concerns for governance in the latter. While the concept of sovereignty has noticeably evolved, China has continued to build and sustain relations with Africa on a policy of non-interference framed in a limited understanding of sovereignty. This stance, which is consistent with the realists' international relations, raises questions about intentions and implications for governance and development in Africa. Therefore, this study interrogates the motivations for China's insistence on noninterference in engagement with Africa. It also interrogates the implications of this policy stance for governance in Africa. The paper relies on evidence from extant literature, including statistical data gleaned from reputable resources. Essentially, the study found that the non-interference policy that rests upon China's limited concept of sovereignty supports allows China not only to insulate its domestic politics against global scrutiny, it also allows China to pursue its economic interests in Africa in ways that undermine governance and sustainable development in the latter. Given that this caged and state-centric understanding of sovereignty presents both real and potential challenges for governance and sustainable development in Africa, the paper therefore argues that the absolute understanding of sovereignty that frames China's non-interference policy has become untenable in light of the emergence of new norms of international relations like citizenship participation, human rights promotion and good governance. This is particularly important in light of the realization that sovereignty can no longer be detached from the interests of the people. Crucially, an unshackled concept of sovereignty will allow public scrutiny of engagement between China and Africa, and thereby promoting constructive bilateral relations.

**Keywords:** China, Africa, Governance, Non-Interference, Development, Depoliticization, Re-Politicization, Sovereignty

## **Introduction**

China has an outstanding history of commitment to the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other sovereign states. Non-interference as a Chinese principle of foreign policy dates back to the 1950 alliance treaty between China and the USSR. However, the principle became a well-articulated part of China's foreign policy when it was listed as one of the so-called Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence between China and India in 1954. Over the years, this principle has become a cornerstone principle of China's foreign policy and international engagements (United Nations, 2014). In its classical context, it means that China pursues a foreign policy in which it refrains from meddling in the internal affairs of other states and it expects other states to reciprocate by not meddling in the domestic affairs of China. Former Chinese president, Hu Jintao, echoed this Chinese sentiment in the "Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (NCCPC) in 2007:

We maintain that all countries, big and small, strong and weak, rich and poor, are equal. We respect the right of the people of all countries to independently choose their own development path; we will never interfere in the internal affairs of other countries or impose our own will on them (Jintao, 2007).

To underscore the centrality of non-interference in China's foreign policymaking, Gonzalez-Vicente (2015) suggested that the principle of non-interference is to China as democracy promotion is to the external relations of the United States (US). It is therefore not totally unexpected that this principle has over the past 60 years framed official relations between China and Africa. Instructively, the 2006 White Paper on Africa declared that China seeks to develop various exchanges with African countries on the basis of the principle of non-interference amongst other guiding principles (see China's Africa Policy Paper 2006). Overall, China's non-interference is underpinned by the notion of respect for the sovereignty of other states. However, both the concept of sovereignty and that of non-interference raise unresolved questions about meanings, intentions and implications.

## **The Contested and Evolving Nature of the Concept of Sovereignty**

Sovereignty is a hotly contested and imprecise concept. As Muller (2013: 37) remarked, while there is no agreement regarding what exactly sovereignty is or means, there is wide agreement about this lack of agreement. In other words, there is broad consensus about the contested nature of the concept of sovereignty. The concept is therefore framed as an unreconciled conceptual debate. Efforts to reconcile the conceptual disagreement that frames the concept is further complicated by disagreement over the meanings of concepts that are usually deployed to describe what sovereignty means. Muller observed in this context that where there is a certain consensus on what related ideas and concepts sovereignty is about, these concepts and ideas themselves are subject of controversy (2013: 37). A further complication to the concept of sovereignty can be drawn from its transforming and evolving nature. Sovereignty is an evolving and not a static concept. It is a fluid concept that can acquire, and that has indeed acquired, different meanings over time. As a concept, it is characterized by a temporality that predisposes it to conceptual fluidity and evolution. Muller (2013) noted in this regard that sovereignty is under attack and it is transforming under the influence of globalization and increased interconnectedness in the world. Sovereignty is therefore resistant to definitive conceptualization because, as Muller (2013: 38) postulated, it is an idea or a concept and not a fact. As an idea, as evident in history, it has acquired new meanings over time and under changing international circumstances. Many authors acknowledge this temporal nature of the concept when they differentiate between the traditional and more contemporary contexts of

the concept. One thing is however clear, despite its changing and evolving nature, sovereignty has remained an enduring concept in international relations since the earliest usage at the Treaty of Westphalia.

As espoused in Coghlan (2015), exercising territorial control in the context of non-interference is at the heart of traditional understanding of the concept of sovereignty. The traditional concept of sovereignty is exclusive and absolute and it embodies the notion of an uncontrolled state. It means the power of the state to do whatever is necessary to preserve the integrity of national boundaries, including endorsing the use of force to defend the superiority of national interests (see He, 2013). Ayoob (2002) would therefore argue that sovereignty in the context of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states is the very foundation upon which international order and the international system is built. In this regard, sovereignty is a normative concept that is used to signify the standard of behavior among members of international society. As a normative concept, sovereignty is sacrosanct and cannot be questioned. Accordingly, those who, like China, maintain this absolute concept of sovereignty as non-interference in the internal affairs of a state have continued to argue that such normative stance is vital to an international system that is characterized by uneven distribution (see Ayoob, 2002). However, the concept of sovereignty has evolved under changing international conditions that have rendered absolute conceptions anachronistic, especially in light of the centrality of concepts like human rights and participation in contemporary development thinking. In particular, the concept of human rights has assumed an unprecedented importance in today's development thinking and international relations theorizing that renders absolute concept of sovereignty untenable. This is because the imperative of global protection of human rights implies, as He (2013) correctly observed, that states no longer have supreme authority over how they treat the population within their territories. Rather, their actions toward their population must now conform to universally accepted best practices. In this context, the idea of universal human rights contradicts the perspective of sovereignty as non-interference.

He (2013: 209) argued that the human rights discourse has made it immoral and impractical to view the world as consisting of territorial units each exerting supreme authority within their own borders. Accordingly, He (2013: 211) posited that contemporary concept of sovereignty is not sacred, but is a commodity that has an exchange value. For instance, sovereignty is exchanged for economic benefits when states join international organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO) for common management of global prosperity. Similarly, sovereignty can be exchanged for good governance, citizenship participation and human rights promotion, where states are increasingly realizing their inadequacies to meet most of the challenges of a rapidly changing and globalizing world. Failure to treat sovereignty as a commodity that can be exchanged for other values may therefore leave states in a precarious situation in which they are unable to respond to some of the most important challenges of the globalizing world. Interestingly, like the concept of sovereignty, the concept of non-interference has also acquired new meanings in the light of the central stage that the discourse on human rights now occupies in contemporary international relations. The conceptual debate in the intervention literature has now shifted away from the traditional fixation on state sovereignty to what is known as humanitarian or new interventions. Humanitarian intervention implies interventionist actions undertaken in defense of human rights under the assumptions that human rights are universal and that the universality of these rights imposes on the international community the responsibility to protect them. Although some, like Ayoob (2002), have called into question the humanitarian intervention argument by contending that the non-interference context of sovereignty is the foundation of international order in a world marked by uneven

distribution, such conceptual stance must be seen as a further testament to the reality of the evolution of the concept of sovereignty.

### **Chinese Limited and Depoliticized Concept of Sovereignty**

Irrespective of the evident evolution of the concept of sovereignty and its contested and highly politicized nature, China has continued to use it in the same traditional context in which sovereignty is absolute, exclusive and depoliticized. For instance, Pathak (2021) noted that territorial integrity is central to the Chinese concept of sovereignty, as preserving territorial integrity is for China a matter of national pride. In this regard, the concept of sovereignty in China's foreign policy expresses China's determination to preserve national territorial integrity through insistence on the principle of non-interference in international relations. Sovereignty for China therefore encapsulates the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of another state. As Yahuda (2007) observed, the principle of non-interference is at the core of China's concept of sovereignty. This strict view of sovereignty rejects any form of interference, including those done under the tag of human rights or humanitarian intervention that most Western governments and institutions advocate. For China, observance of sovereignty as non-interference is central to international order (Muller, 2013). This strict concept of sovereignty trumps human rights considerations in China's foreign policy, as Chinese leaders usually argue that there would be no human rights to protect without sovereignty (Yahuda, 2007).

Shulong (2001) noted, it is not just that the Chinese concept of national sovereignty is very traditional, it is also more crucially that the Chinese government expends a great deal of effort defending this strict understanding of sovereignty. For instance, during the September 2000 United Nations Millennium Summit, President Jiang Zemin of China argued against the notion that human rights rank higher than sovereignty. For Jiang, national sovereignty is the only guarantee of human rights. Crucially, Jiang conceptualized sovereignty in terms of sovereign equality of all states; mutual respect for the sovereignty of every state; and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Notwithstanding the obligations states have to protect human rights, Jiang argued that it is this understanding of sovereignty that is at the heart of contemporary international relations. Consequently, Jiang maintained that it is the solemn right of the government of every country to protect national sovereignty and security. Interestingly, China's traditional concept of sovereignty is rooted in the UN Charter, which stipulates non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Paragraph Four, Article 2 of the UN Charter provides a legal basis for the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states when it stipulates that all members of the United Nations (UN):

shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations.

For Jiang, meddling in the internal affairs of other states in the name of humanitarian intervention is against the spirit of the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. Not only that, Jiang contended further that such violation of sovereignty can lead to severe consequences. More crucially, Jiang emphasized that the success of multilateral intervention must be judged by the extent to which such interventions adhere to the principles of the UN Charter, one of which include respecting the sovereignty of other states by not meddling in their internal affairs. Overall, Jiang Zemin maintained that interference can only be justified where consent has been given by the country concerned.

While the UN Charter forbids intervention, it fails to, as Hirono, Jiang, and Lanteigne (2019) observed, state in specific terms what may constitute intervention. This conceptual

omission can potentially result in selective interpretation of the Charter provision. Sir Hersch Lauterpach tried to solve this problem of omission by conceptualizing intervention as dictatorial interference (cited in Hirono et al. 2019). Nevertheless, Lauterpach's efforts at conceptual clarification created a problem of its own; it created in the literature a tendency towards differentiating intervention from interference. Specifically, many subsequently interpreted Lauterpach's conceptualization of intervention as dictatorial interference as implying that intervention is distinct from interference. Accordingly, intervention became associated with the use of force or coercion, while interference may not entail coercion, although both take place against the will of the country in question. This conceptual bifurcation was however resolved under the *UNGA Declaration of December 1981 on the inadmissibility of intervention and interference*, where it was stipulated that both intervention and interference constitute the same thing. The Declaration makes no distinction between the two terms and it therefore employs the singular use of the term "principle" of non-interference and non-intervention to refer to the legal obligation of states not meddling in the internal affairs of other states. Essentially, the UNGA Declaration of 1981 remove this distinction and defines both intervention and interference as implying political or military activity that takes place within the territory of another state without the consent of the state in question.

Consistent with the Charter provision of the UN, China has continued to maintain a view of sovereignty that forbids interference in the affairs of other states. In this absolute context, the concept of sovereignty is limited and depoliticized, as it constructs the state as a unitary and undifferentiated actor that exercises unchallenged and uncontested authority over every entity and event within its borders. Maintaining this depoliticized stance that emphasizes state-centric national self-determination and non-interference (Creemers, 2020) despite the contested and evolving nature of the concept begs the question of underlying motivations. This question becomes especially imperative in view of China's characteristic inconsistency in adhering to the principle in actual foreign policy practice (see Yahuda, 2007) and in view of potential implications for Africa's development.

### **The Symbolism and Political Economy of Non-interference in China's Foreign Policy**

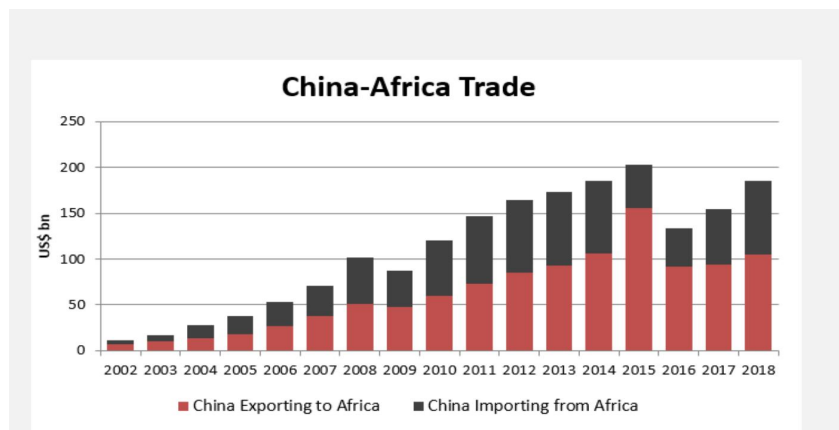
China's concept of sovereignty is like a caged dragon and it is important that we understood the Chinese motives for caging this dragon and the potential implications for Africa. China maintains the absolute concept of sovereignty for both historical symbolism and pragmatic (political and economic) purposes. At the symbolic level, it is worth noting that China has a not-too-distant history of imperial intervention in its territorial sovereignty that perhaps explains partly why China is very sensitive to issues of territorial sovereignty as captured in its non-interference foreign policy principle. Carlson (2002) wrote in this regard that memories of this past infringement explain the reluctance of Chinese political elites to commit China to multilateral intervention and the norm of humanitarian intervention. It therefore becomes difficult to disconnect the prioritization of sovereignty in the Chinese foreign policy from the history of imperial intrusion and occupation of China. Sovereignty as non-interference therefore symbolizes China's anti-imperialism ideology and history (see Creemers, 2020). It is however instructive to note that this ideological and historical symbolism has a functional importance in China's foreign policy. For instance, non-interference symbolizes for China and Africa a shared history of colonial domination that helps China to promote the idea that Sino-Africa relations are fundamentally different from Africa's relations with the West (see Kambudzi 2013). The 2006 China's African Policy Paper made reference to this shared history when it asserts that:

China-Africa friendship is embedded in the long history of interchange. Sharing similar historical experience, China and Africa have all along sympathized with and supported each other in the struggle for national liberation and forged a profound friendship (Paragraph 1, Part II, China's African Policy Paper, 2006).

China's insistence on the concept of sovereignty as non-interference is borne out of the understanding by China that showing respect for the sovereignty of other states can help to build trust and friendly relationship (see Part IV, Paragraph 3, China's Africa Policy Paper 2006). In the context of relations with Africa therefore, the principle of non-interference must also be understood as one of such principles that make China attractive to Africa, especially to authoritarian African regimes that view this policy as essential to regime security and also in view of Africa's enduring history of external meddling in its affairs. For African countries, the Chinese non-interference is a break from their history of external domination and the carryover of this history in the form of imposition of political conditionalities by major Western donors. In this regard, the concept of sovereignty is a tool of diplomacy and statecraft that is deployed by China to present itself as a historical victim of foreign conquest and intrusion (see Pathak, 2021).

This form of victimhood portrayal allows China to justify actions taken in the name of preserving or respecting territorial sovereignty and thereby covering its real intentions. Crucially, some argue that appeal to this historical sentiment allows China to both build strong ties with Africa and justify otherwise unjustifiable practices in its international relations (Sofer 2012). Remarkably, China has grown to become Africa's second largest trading partner after the EU over the last 60 years (Lewis and Schneidman, 2014). Bilateral trade between China and Africa has grown by almost 1000% from as little as below \$20 billion in 2002 to over \$200 billion by 2015 and dropping slightly at around \$180 billion in 2018 (see Fig. 1). More than before, it has therefore become pertinent to interrogate the pragmatic considerations that frame China's engagements with Africa.

Fig. 1: China-Africa Trade (2002-2018)



**Source:** UN Comtrade, February 2020

At a more pragmatic level, the concept of sovereignty as non-interference is deeply rooted in China's domestic politics. This is not surprising as Weissmann (2015) already clarified that domestic politics is a key determinant of China's foreign policy. According to Weissmann (2015), China's foreign policy is embedded in domestic issues, with the foremost being to ensure domestic political stability and by extension regime survival. For China, domestic political stability is essential for the survival of its one-party system. In this sense, external interference is perceived as serious threat to both domestic stability and regime survival. Although the



principle of non-interference served the purpose of anti-imperialism and conflict resolution in the early years of its formulation as part of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, it is serving a different purpose that is focused on the survival of the Communist regime in China in today's era of globalization (see Yahuda, 2007). While China's international relations today is indeed marked by greater economic interdependence and increased engagement with the international community, its foreign policy is largely shaped by the domestic political consideration of regime survival. Insulating its domestic politics against external intrusion is central to this goal. This may therefore provide a critical explanation for China's strong preference for an insular policy in its international relations. Particularly as it was felt that non-interference will help to advance the "One China" policy with respect to Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang (Weissmann, 2015).

It is however important to note that both domestic political stability and regime survival are, for China, dependent on continuing economic growth. This implied centrality of continuing economic growth to China's quest for domestic stability and regime survival would therefore imply that there is an economic dimension to the discourse on motivations of non-interference in China's foreign policy. Odgaard (2018: 78) drew attention to this economic dimension of the hands-off policy by pointing out that the non-interference policy allows China to establish a global economic engagement irrespective of political, social or economic differences with recipient countries.

**Table 1: Showing China's Major Trading Partners in Africa (2010-2019)**

Year	Algeria	Angola	DRC	Egypt	Ghana	Kenya	Libya	Morocco	Nigeria	SA	SUDAN
<b>Import from Africa</b>											
2010	1177.32	22815.05	2505.72	917.93	123.38	39.21	4515.61	452.32	1071.62	8095.83	0.00
2011	1960.89	24922.18	3161.99	1518.34	363.18	59.69	2063.58	475.63	1583.68	12495.81	0.00
2012	2311.91	33561.90	3527.10	1320.74	643.55	52.41	6375.90	558.42	1273.79	10320.51	1554.27
2013	2164.55	31972.67	2745.66	1851.61	1203.33	52.78	2038.93	531.43	1546.60	12047.24	2100.02
2014	1314.68	31106.02	2815.74	1159.33	1452.60	77.03	726.37	517.91	2658.35	8770.89	1521.28
2015	767.36	16001.61	2627.43	917.84	1296.47	98.74	951.55	521.52	1240.70	7420.28	728.39
2016	331.89	13966.12	2084.96	553.21	1309.65	97.14	345.62	553.46	907.01	6812.08	504.71
2017	448.32	20698.71	3289.99	1341.93	1852.94	166.82	1362.66	650.60	1624.05	8672.25	590.80
2018	1178.82	25652.02	5682.94	1834.53	2426.14	174.20	4742.28	711.07	1858.99	8550.85	670.03
2019	1141.66	23308.30	4436.61	996.82	2543.92	181.21	4765.67	635.51	2652.14	9595.42	740.42
Position	7 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Export to Africa</b>											
2010	4000.00	2003.87	353.71	6040.98	1932.87	1786.30	2061.36	2484.47	6696.84	10799.86	0.00
2011	4471.88	2784.15	489.43	7283.23	3109.95	2368.78	720.38	3042.65	9205.57	13362.30	0.00
2012	5416.66	4039.17	520.99	8223.92	4790.75	2788.76	2384.24	3131.19	9296.31	15323.31	2178.61
2013	6023.90	3964.06	779.29	8362.67	3946.03	3217.48	2834.68	3271.65	12042.61	16830.78	2398.43
2014	7395.24	5975.31	984.53	10460.51	4134.57	4930.57	2157.64	2963.01	15393.56	15699.15	1928.61
2015	7583.35	3717.15	1035.42	47834.31	5308.88	5914.32	1892.02	2897.18	13701.24	15857.92	2394.50
2016	7647.85	1680.40	740.63	10436.26	4666.60	5587.65	1184.61	3078.78	9713.91	12849.51	2129.73
2017	6784.75	2257.45	497.84	9485.64	4824.80	5034.65	1027.97	3176.23	12153.16	14808.77	2221.76
2018	7923.38	2234.93	444.88	12020.88	4821.89	5204.94	1433.05	3690.13	13500.04	16337.35	1884.77
2019	6945.57	2057.49	2077.31	12217.15	4906.97	4984.58	2453.89	4030.06	16634.07	16560.93	2292.12
Position	4 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>

**Source:** UNComtrade data from 2010-2019, <http://comtrade.un.org/data/>

**Table 2: Showing the state of democracy (political rights and civil liberty) in China's major trading partners in Africa**

Countries	Political Rights	Civil Liberty	Total Score and Status
Algeria	10	22	32/not free
Angola	10	21	31/not free
DRC	5	15	20/not free
Egypt	6	12	18/not free
Ghana	35	47	82/free
Kenya	19	29	48/partly free
Libya	1	8	9/not free
Morocco	13	24	37/partly free
Nigeria	21	24	45/partly free
SA	33	46	79/free
Sudan	2	15	17/not free

**Source:** Freedom House Report (2021) <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

China's expanding economic ties with Africa is also noticeable in the area of development funding, where the former has gradually emerged as a major source of development assistance for African countries (Stahl, 2016; Brautigam 2011). Although the West remains the most dominant force in development funding in Africa, China is today a major development partner for many African countries (see Mlambo et al. 2016). Africa accounted for more than half (51.8%) of total Chinese aid between 2010 and 2012 (see Stahl, 2016). A report by the Chinese Embassy in South Africa cited by Mlambo et al. (2016: 261) claimed that China had aid agreements with at least 48 African states as of 2013. This is in addition to loan accord with 22 African states (Mlambo et al. 2016). Over the years, particularly since 2000, China has pledged billions of US dollars in aid, loans and debt forgiveness to Africa. For instance, China reportedly in 2009 committed itself to \$10 billion low-interest loans to African states over three years (Chileshe 2010, as cited in Mlambo et al. 2016: 261).

Curiously, the driving force of Chinese aid to Africa has transformed over the years from primarily ideology and politics in the early days of the 1950s to largely economic pragmatism from the late 1970s reform and opening-up policy (see He, 2013a; 2010; Samy, 2010). Today, China's aid appears to move in the direction of its economic interests in Africa. This directional convergence of the economic and the developmental in China's engagement with Africa would imply a larger part of China's aid to Africa going to its largest trading partners on the continent; most of these countries are under authoritarian regimes with poor human rights and governance records (see Tables 1, 2 & 3). Perhaps it is not a coincidence that, as shown in tables 1 & 4, that China's major trading partners in Africa are also the biggest recipients of Chinese aid to Africa. This directional convergence of aid and trade provide some credibility for the view that China adopts an aid policy that helps it to build friendship in Africa as well as open up African markets (see Samy, 2010). While Chinese aid policy is consistent with its foreign policy objectives, it is hard to ignore the question of how and where China allocates its aid in Africa.

**Table 3: Top-10 Recipients of China's and US Aid in Africa**

China		
s/n	Aid Recipient	Value (Million USD)
1	Congo	3006
2	Tanzania	1748
3	Ethiopia	1565

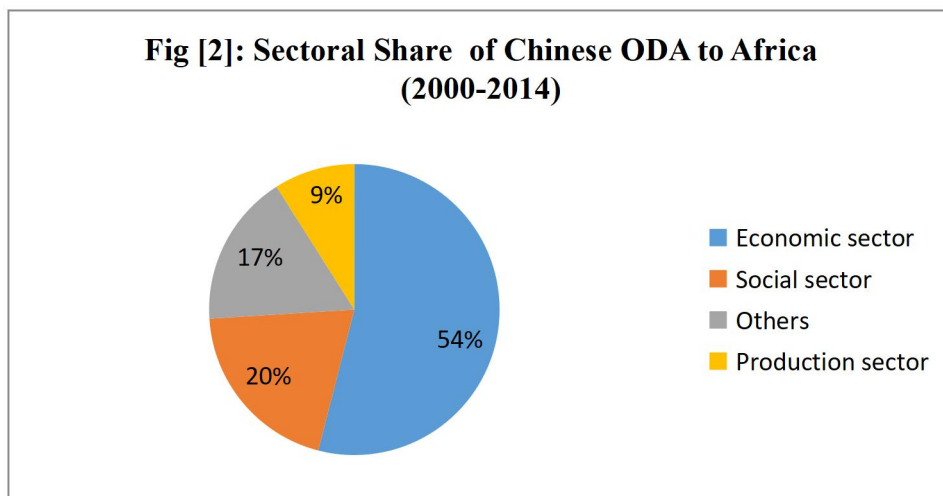


4	Nigeria	1258
5	Egypt	1131
6	Cameroon	6579
7	Angola	5158
8	Kenya	3696
9	Mozambique	3257
10	Sudan	2475

**Source:** UN AidData

Instructive to note, Chinese development aid to Africa usually target the economic sector. For instance, African countries attracted in excess of US\$34 billion Chinese official development assistance (ODA) between 2000 and 2014 (see Guillon and Mathonnat 2018), with the economic sector accounting for more than 54% of Chinese ODA allocation (see Fig 2). Specifically, China financed a total of 1592 ODA projects in Africa between 2000 and 2014 at a cost of US\$34.8 billion (Guillon and Mathonnat 2018). At the 2018 FOCAC Summit, China committed itself to US\$50 billion in development aid to Africa over three years (see Tjonneland 2020). And of the total aid pledge, US\$15 billion will come as foreign aid in the form of grants, interest-free loans and concessional loans (Tjonneland 2020). Such huge pledge in foreign aid will make China a major bilateral donor to Africa, and the pledge would also imply that China will overtake the US as the biggest aid donor to Africa (Tjonneland 2020). Despite this seemingly growing importance of China in development funding in Africa, Tjonneland (2020: 4) contended that much of what China classify as development aid do not qualify as such when using the OECD-DAC criteria.

More so, the narrative that China allocates ODA mainly to further its political and economic interests in Africa has persisted (see Guillon and Mathonnat 2018; Dreher and Fuchs 2015). Such perceptions are for example not helped by the observable preference China has shown for funding development in the economic sector relative to other sectors in Africa (see Fig. 2). While China is not alone in dealing with rogue regimes in Africa and across the world (see Table 4), the fundamental question for China is: what China is doing to address governance issues in major trade partners in Africa and around the world. It is clear that China can do better by using the opportunity of increasing exchanges with these states to strengthen governance in Africa by including governance requirements as conditionality for bilateral relations and by making governance promotion a central priority of its development funding in Africa.



**Source:** Guillon and Mathonnat (2018)

### **Implications of Chinese Non-interference for Governance in Africa**

China's emotional attachment to the policy of non-interference, based on a strict and narrow concept of sovereignty, in external relations implies that there is very little China can do to enhance governance in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world. For instance, while traditional donors like the US and EU make use of political conditionality to address governance deficit in Africa and other developing regions, China has continued to insist on the non-conditionality principle. This aid principle is borne out of China's preference for a traditional concept of sovereignty that privileges an understanding of the state as a unitary and undifferentiated actor rather than politicize it as an arena of multiple interests and contestations. This form of understanding of the state is what theoretically underpins China's policy of respecting the sovereignty of other countries in international relations by not interfering in their domestic affairs. From the perspective of sovereignty as non-interference, imposition of conditionality, including those that can help to strengthen governance and democracy, would imply infringement on the sovereignty of other states. Therefore, China makes non-conditionality the cornerstone of its economic engagement with Africa. Unlike mainstream donors, China avoids imposing political conditionality as a precondition for aid. While the attractiveness of accessing such unconditional development assistance can facilitate for China smoother access to the markets of recipients, it can undermine governance and sustainable development in recipient countries (Samy, 2010; Nonfodji, 2013).

Many have therefore questioned both the motives and developmental imperatives of Chinese aid policy in Africa. Naim (2007), for instance, called China a rogue donor that is driven more by commercial and political interests than by the development needs of recipients. This view resonates with most Western observers, who hold the view that China aims to lock-in neocolonial ties with African countries through its aid policy of non-conditionality. Given the temporal coincidence between increasing Chinese aid to Africa and increasing Chinese demand for resources to sustain its expanding growth rate since the end of the Cold War, some have argued that aid is for China a tool of economic expansion (Samy, 2010; Rich and Recker, 2013; Asongu and Ssozi, 2015; Guillon and Mathonnat, 2018; Dreher and Fuchs, 2015). More explicitly, Samy (2010) contended that aid, like other packages of incentives offered by China to African countries, are means for the Chinese to secure access to important resources. While claiming no strings attached to attract African countries, Samy (2010) averred that Chinese aid reflects China's appetite for securing long-term supplies of oil and other natural resources. In this regard, more than the desire to preserve respect for the sovereignty of African countries, it is the need to preserve particularistic economic interests that motivates non-conditionality, hence non-interference as a Chinese principle for engaging Africa.

The import of non-interference is therefore located in how this policy principle helps to make China more attractive to Africa relative to traditional donors that usually insist on infusing conditionality in the aid they provide. To underscore the economic pragmatism of China's non-interference, Samy (2010) noted China's silence on the human rights abuses of the Sudanese government at the height of the Darfur crisis. This observation is consistent with Askouri's (2007) suggestion of double standard in the Chinese practice of non-interference. For Askouri, China indeed interfered in the politics of several African countries through the provision of assistance to authoritarian regimes in countries like Sudan, Chad and Zimbabwe. In this regard, China's appeal to non-interference is just an excuse to shy away from its human rights responsibilities. Askouri therefore argued that Chinese non-interference has promoted dictatorships and tyranny in several African countries.

Essentially, the policy of non-interference that allows China to provide aid and development assistance to African countries without the infusion of governance requirements like respect for human rights and rule of law can potentially challenge governance in Africa. For instance, provision of aid without conditionality would imply that there are no mechanisms for monitoring how aid provided by China to African countries are spent by recipients. In addition, it would imply that recipient governments cannot be held accountable by their citizens (Samy, 2010). Chinese non-interference therefore encourages an aid policy that discourages transparency and accountability. This transparency and accountability deficit can come with serious implications for aid effectiveness. Perhaps nothing better underscore this point than He's (2013) observation that China does not have an independent aid agency as obtains among traditional donors. The core contention here is that Chinese aid policy lacks both mechanisms of supervision and evaluation that can better guarantee effectiveness in the use of aid. Therefore, for many, non-interference robs Chinese aid policy of the kind of (governance) selectivity that promotes aid effectiveness (see Burnside and Dollar, 1997; 2000; World Bank, 1998). Concerns about the lack of selectivity in China's aid become starker when dealing with African countries under regimes that have built up a reputation for being corrupt and non-accountable. For instance, Cheng (2019) notes concerns that Chinese aid could lead to debt trap for African countries.

Since China gives mainly concessional loans with very low interest rates rather than outright grants, there are concerns that such low-interest loans provided by China may lead to debt traps for many African countries as African countries may be encouraged to borrow irresponsibly. While China is a signatory to the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness, its commitment to non-interference would imply in practice a lack of commitment to governance conditionality required for actualizing the goal of aid effectiveness, as such conditionality would imply meddling in the affairs of other countries for China. Scholars like Lancaster (2007) have therefore expressed concerns that the no-strings-attached approach to aid that Chinese non-interference engenders may not encourage the kind of reforms that are needed for sustainable development in Africa. A general concern is that the non-conditionality that springs from China's commitment to non-interference in its external relations can undermine efforts at promoting democracy and good governance in Africa. This concern is not farfetched as the Chinese depoliticized concept of sovereignty as non-interference strips sovereignty of all contestations by making the state a unitary actor with no place for civil society in the development process. China can therefore be charged for adopting an approach to engaging Africa that emphasizes development without democracy (Lonnqvist, 2008). In this context, Lonnqvist (2008) argued that the Chinese model of development without democracy excludes, and implicitly discredits the notion that an autonomous, vibrant civil society is central to development. Chinese aid policy can therefore further compromise the already fragile governance architecture of most African countries. As already noted, disbursement of Chinese aid is governed by other rules other than those that rest on governance conditionality.

Crucially, China's insistence on non-interference and respect for the sovereignty of other states in international relations would imply that China is unable to infuse governance conditionality as part of the eligibility requirements that recipients must meet before they are able to access Chinese development aid. Not only can this become a demotivation and disincentive for the process of democratic governance in Africa, it can also undermine efforts to build the required governance institutions for sustainable development in Africa. This is even as authoritarian regimes may begin to look to China as an escape route from conditionality-based mainstream sources of development assistance. As expressed in He (2013), major concerns

about China's aid border around issues of governance and transparency. For most critics, Chinese aid represents an alternative that allows despotic regimes in Africa to bypass governance requirements in accessing development assistance. For instance, Davies (2007) notes how the provision of \$2 billion loans and credits without any political conditionality by China's Export-Import (Exim) Bank to Angola allowed the Angolan government to bypass an IMF financing facility that was tied to meeting governance requirements designed to promote transparency in the latter's oil sector. By potentially providing an escape route from governance requirements for corrupt and despotic African regimes seeking to access development assistance, Chinese non-interference therefore poses both potential and real danger to democracy and democratization as well as sustainable development in Africa. Non-interference therefore raises more questions than answers in relations between China and Africa.

## **Conclusion**

China cannot continue to insist on its traditional sovereignty-framed non-interference policy. China's limited concept of sovereignty and the non-interference policy that rests on this caged and state-centric understanding of sovereignty presents both real and potential challenges for governance and sustainable development in Africa. Re-politicizing and unleashing the dragon called sovereignty by viewing it as a contested and citizens-centered concept therefore becomes indispensable to overcoming governance and development challenges that are associated with China's engagements with Africa as a whole and with the policy of non-interference upon which these engagements are anchored. This is particularly important in light of the realization that sovereignty can no longer be detached from the interests of the people. Essentially, such unshackled concept of sovereignty will allow public scrutiny of engagement between China and Africa. It is clearer now than ever that the kind of absolute understanding of sovereignty that frame China's non-interference policy has become untenable in light of the emergence of new norms of international relations like citizenship participation, human rights promotion and good governance (He, 2013; Muller, 2013; Coghlan, 2015). It is in this regard He (2013: 214) notably remarked that the exclusive practice of sovereignty, the sacredness of sovereignty, and the use of force to defend sovereignty all belong to a nineteenth century understanding.

The reality of the contemporary world therefore demands a recalibrating of both the concept of sovereignty and intervention. As Ren (2013) rightly observed, while non-interference remains the norm of international relations, it no longer implies that intervention cannot take place. Rather, it now implies the need to justify intervention, whenever they are to take place. As already shown, China's attachment to the non-interference policy is not just emotional but also strategic and pragmatic and laced with political-economic considerations. The non-interference policy that this limited concept of sovereignty supports allows China not only to insulate its domestic politics against global scrutiny, it also allows China to pursue its economic interests in Africa in ways that undermine governance and sustainable development in the latter.

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