

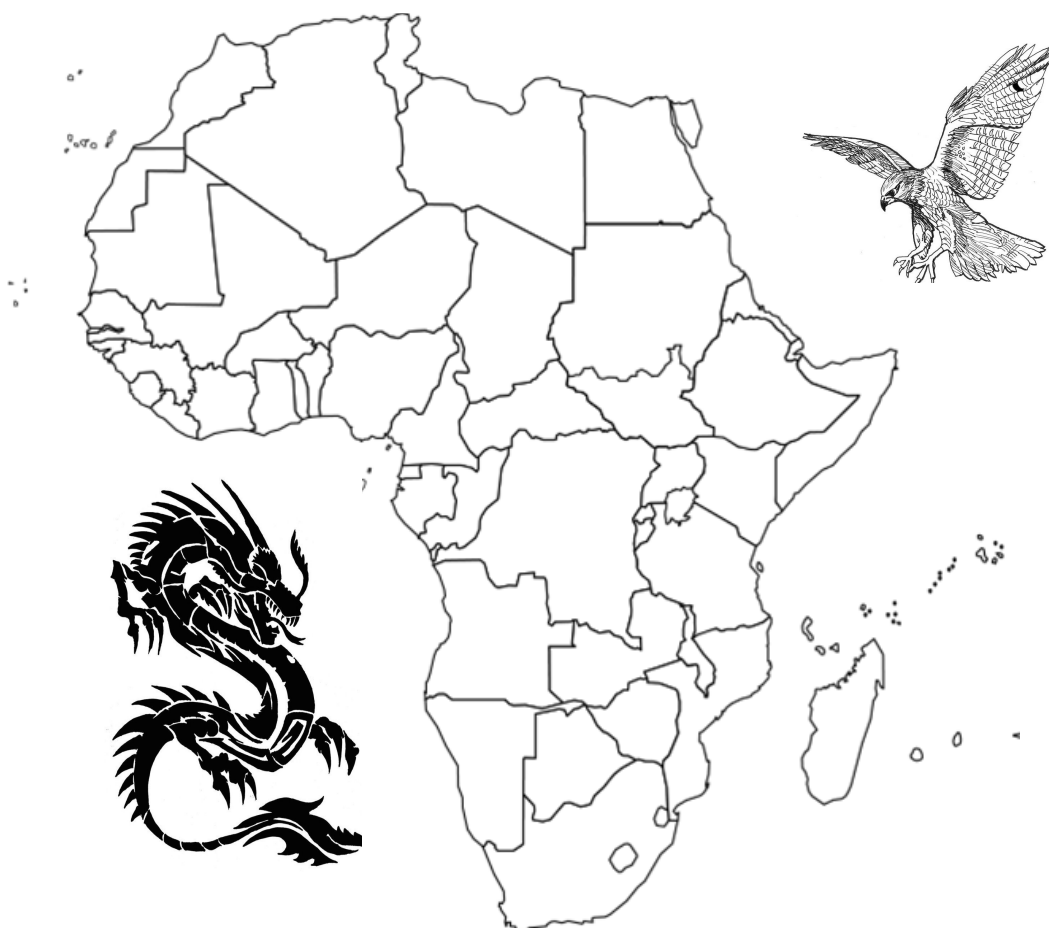
The Dragon and the Falcon:

Chinese and Gulf Arab Neo-colonial Competition in 21st Century Africa

Based on the paper: 'God, Gold and Power'

By

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Firstly let me thank the academy for the opportunity to address this esteemed gathering.

I would like to open this presentation with a quote by Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president (1957-66) and a champion of African nationalism in the post-colonial period. In explaining the African dilemma vis à vis powerful foreign actors he said:

“Africa is a paradox which illustrates and highlights neo-colonialism. Her earth is rich, yet the products that come from above and below the soil continue to enrich, not Africans predominantly, but groups and individuals who operate to Africa's impoverishment.”

When asked to present a paper based on the previous publication 'God, Gold & Power', I relished the chance because I believe that something is missing from the debate concerning the 'Africa rising' narrative.

Yes, a lot of scholarly attention has been paid to the role the People's Republic of China has played to date in many African states. There is a staggering amount of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) that has and continues to enter the African continent.¹ Many observers have claimed that this FDI has 'bought' China a seat at the table of great powers. That Chinese FDI has made Beijing a 21st Century 'metropolitan power' bent on dominating a continent long forgotten by the West. However, China is but one major power driving events on the African continent.

The Europeans, particularly the French, British, Italians and Spanish, are deeply invested in African stability.²

For them, African stability and economic success is twofold: (a) it prevents an uncontrolled crisis over population movement from 'failed' and 'failing' states of Africa to the prosperous states of the EU;³ (b) it allows economic growth to distract local African populations from contemplating actions that are anathema to European interests – more specifically, indulging in, or tolerating the presence of Muslim or other extremist groups harbouring anti-European sentiment.⁴

Why is this important? Well may you ask. The EU collectively will in time want to tap into the resources on the African continent.

The Americans are also actively involving themselves in parts of Africa. US-based charities and NGOs keep American interests alive.⁵ The promise of US State Department financial aid, and military aid for 'friendly' governments, presents to the local African elite a way to leverage one foreign power off against another. But American interest in Africa is far from altruistic.⁶ Washington has concerns about China's influence over Africa and African resources.⁷ It is worried about some African states that have little to no control over their borders, with zones of national territory acting as sanctuaries and/or springboards for narco-traffickers and terrorists. In a very real sense, in spite of the Chinese, the EU and the US pursuing their own agendas on the African continent – they all share common concerns over the stability of the existing international order in Africa. None of them desire state failure, massive population movement and socio-political upheaval.

But there is one foreign presence that looms large, and in a historical and cultural sense, is very much a part of African social tradition. It is one that few speak of in terms of its potential hold over more than half of Africa, the northern half, and that is, the collective of the Gulf Arab states. With a booming population (especially in Saudi Arabia), and oil and gas wealth, the Arab states, the defenders and upholders of conservative Sunni Islamic ideals, look to 21st Century Africa as a geographically proximate and culturally friendly source of fertile land and water. As the Arab peninsula's resources become increasingly strained due to its growing population, some significant proceeds of Arabian oil and gas are being reinvested in northern African economies to insure against precious land and water being exclusively owned and exploited by Chinese interests.

African states, north and south of the Sahara, are, with the possible exception of South Africa, weak and dependent on foreign aid and investment to keep the local elite in power and existing post-colonial state boundaries in check. Yes, the local elite will attempt to exploit foreign need for resources to their economic benefit. But the central question I wish to raise in this forum is: does money alone buy loyalty?

If current scholarship on 'Africa rising' is true, then the prize would naturally go to China.

The EU and the US can and do play the security card,⁸ but commercially they are not competing with Beijing, nor will they be in the position to do so until their own economic houses are in order. That leaves the only real challenger to Chinese influence in Africa – the Arabs. They not only have deep pockets, what they bring to the table is Islam. Chinese businessmen bring bags of cash; the Chinese government can grease the wheels of business by providing buckets of untied aid;⁹ but the Arabs can do more – they can assuage the local elite through their shared faith.

It is my contention that this bond between many African people and the Arab people may, in time, act as a check to Chinese power and influence on the African continent. I believe that Arab proximity to Africa, as well as cultural affinity brought about by history and religion, may well emerge more overtly as an impenetrable barrier to China in Africa. Indeed, as the 21st Century progresses, competition between these rising primary players (PRC and the GCC) in Africa will intensify and lead to proxy wars and other asymmetric means to undermine and curb the influence of one another. Africa and Africans may enrich themselves while staying within the confines of the established post-colonial international order, and political and economic norms, but the PRC and GCC, if caught in an existential fight for survival, may well test these boundaries. We must remember that neither contemporary China nor the Arab states are necessarily interested in preserving a Western international order, particularly when their own survival is at stake. They tolerate this order only in so far as it gives them room to manoeuvre to legitimise themselves to their people and to the international community. Once they have outgrown this need, Africa may revert back to its default setting as an international cockpit but this time caught between 'neo-Orientalist' imperialism.

To get to the root cause of this presentation, we will have to take a brief trip through time.

In the year 1403, China's Yongle Emperor (a name meaning 'perpetual happiness') (1402-24),¹⁰ the third of the Ming dynasty emperors, launched a massively expensive and highly ambitious naval shipbuilding program. His aim was to create the world's

largest 'treasure fleet' to seek out new lands, new people and new sources of wealth and tribute. It was the very first and only time that dynastic China had undertaken such a program of outward maritime expansion. Dynastic China was for most of its history a land-based power, eyeing off its unstable western frontier where predatory, highly organised and motivated Steppe tribes (the worst and the most recent of which were the Mongols), raided and pillaged their way into civilised Chinese lands.

The Treasure Fleet embarked on its first voyage in 1405. It was led by the highly able Admiral Zheng He who was to undertake seven voyages of discovery in ships that no naval yards of Europe could match.¹¹

Zheng's fifth voyage took the Treasure Fleet to Africa for the first time. There, it travelled to the ports of Mogadishu and Mombasa. What may have been apparent to Zheng and his crew was that Arab traders had already settled there and the Muslim religion was wide spread among the inhabitants of the more urbane coastal areas of east Africa. Being a Muslim himself, and living at a time when ecumenicalism was as prevalent in more sophisticated circles as sectarianism, Zheng may not have had any problems with this casual observation. But the facts are that (a) Zheng would only make two more trips to east Africa (1421-22 and 1430-33) and (b) these trips would be the last time that China visited African shores in a sustained and systematic way until the later part of the 20th Century.

Historians have long speculated on the Chinese imperial court's decision to scrap the Treasure Fleet and whether, had the fleet's existence continued, it could have ushered in an age of Chinese maritime supremacy similar in scale to that of the British Empire. But the last time the fleet set sail was in 1430. The Yongle Emperor was no more. He died in 1424 in pursuit of Tartar tribes in the Gobi Desert. Imperial patronage of the Treasure Fleet under successors the Hongxi (1424-25) and Xuande (1425-35) emperors waned. Their commitment was to build the Great Wall to secure China's west from barbarian tribes. When the order was given to scrap the Treasure Fleet (1433), China's strength slowly declined, as did its international potential. It reached its lowest point by the end of the imperial system in 1911, before the country's re-emergence as a modern trading nation post-1978. It is perhaps ironic that the decline of China's imperial system, the phase known

as the 100 Years of Humiliation (1849-1949), was in large measure due to the maritime power of the European and Japanese empires.

This then left northern Africa economically and culturally in the Arab orbit and as time went on, Islam became the social glue that kept local kingdoms and empires together. Arab traders not only made their way to east Africa in ships, they opened up a network of land routes extending as far west as the Atlantic coastline and Bay of Guinea. This was a significant portion of the African continent. Indeed, Muslim penetration of Africa did not change significantly with the arrival of European explorers and colonisers. The breakup of the African continent into various spheres of European colonial rule and the spread of Christianity, had more of an impact in southern Africa where various tribes and chiefdoms were still practicing animism and could be induced to convert to Christianity.¹² Fewer Muslims converted to Christianity, leaving Muslim North Africa largely to its own devices, its takeover by European powers notwithstanding.

So what does this mean?

The patterns of colonialism, trade and foreign settlement certainly had a profound impact on the African people. Today, from a sectarian perspective, the continent can be roughly divided in half, with the north predominantly Muslim, the south predominantly Christian. The languages of Europe dominate as 'strategic tongues' superimposed on a host of local dialects and linguistic forms. But in the north, the language of Arabia, the language of Islam, is very significant. As the first major monotheistic religion to have entered Africa, Islam deeply binds together local communities who have accepted this form of worship. Muslim communities trade with each other often in preference to animist or Christian groups. This is due to a perception of trust layered by the shared belief and normative values inherent in Islam. Proof of this is the unofficial Muslim channel of finance called the Hawala system run by Muslim money brokers. The Hawala system sits in parallel to more formal banking and money transfer structures and is embedded throughout the Muslim Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.¹³

For the modern Chinese trader, this reality may form a significant, albeit little discussed barrier.

The Chinese are latecomers to global trade and international influence. Their empire made China the premier Asian power, but this did not translate into power beyond the borders of continental Asia.

The turmoil of post-imperial China and the socialist experiments of Mao kept China and the Chinese people locked away in a peculiar international isolation. Maoist rhetoric of an Afro-Asian post-colonial neutral but 'socialist-leaning' brotherhood, may have been appealing to some revolutionary anti-European movements in Africa during the 1950s-60s, but it certainly was not a broad-based or a deep sentiment.¹⁴ China's brief flirtation with power projection during the early Ming dynasty with the Treasure Fleet, could have netted Beijing a lineage of colonialism and the spread of Confucian thought in Africa, but only in the absence of Mongol and Manchu predations. This then comes back to the idea that China's contemporary hold over Africa because of the money it brings to the table, is of consequence only to Africans who believe, like many Europeans (Christian, Agnostic & Atheist alike), that money alone equals power.

In Africa, north of the Sahel, where material possessions and life can be made forfeit by the harshness of the environment, religion is considered the superior standard.

Leading a moral life, even in poverty, is considered valuable and is a mark of strength and survival. Those with money and material wealth are imbued with the idea that '*what God giveth, God can taketh away*'. That is, all that is worldly is transitory, as is social position based on worldliness.¹⁵ This philosophical break from contemporary Chinese business practice does not mean that trade and other forms of commerce cannot be conducted with people of other belief structures, but it does allude that commercial ties between Muslims are stronger and are preferred over commercial ties with non-believers.

Initially when my colleagues and I began to look at figures to support our findings on the nature and scope of Chinese and Arab investment in Africa under our then working title 'God, Gold and Power', as a political scientist grounded in the realpolitik world of defence and security, I began to question the figures. But not only that, I began questioning the importance of the figures. What did they mean? Do the econometrics support China's dominance over

the African continent? Well, yes they do if one wants to see it that way. But in the relative absence of figures for the Gulf Arab states, did this mean that Arab traders and investors are not important players in Africa? Figures alone couldn't tell this story. Why? Because this comes down to the fundamentals of the reality we choose to see as important. In today's age, economics is 'king'. Economics, the objective truth of figures, gives observers and purveyors of such thought a power that they have only recently acquired.¹⁶ And in a world where figures are fungible, able to be manipulated by states with a vested interest in being seen to be successful, who does one believe? The IMF? The World Bank? The various development banks? The Chinese state? The Arab states? The latter being known to have almost total opacity in terms of where official figures come from. Do we trust African states to keep good records of their accounts? Where is aid to them coming from and where it is going to? The multilateral institutions such as the IMF and World Bank are possibly the only ones where crosschecked data streams can pin point a 'best guess' at the nature of African economies and what is keeping them alive. So obviously we are inclined to use these 'trusted sources' of objective information, knowing all the while that their material is by and large tainted. After all, a rough approximation is better than no approximation. We need benchmarks, something to quantify what we see as obvious. We can't account for the untold amounts of untraceable money going into Africa to grease the wheels of business, but we can ascertain that since the Chinese are present in numbers that matter, they are the dominant investors. We know that Chinese business, like business practice anywhere is savage. We know that poor people in poor countries desperate to escape poverty, will indulge in questionable business practices in order to secure their families, their clans, their tribes, their political power-bases. But we also know from history that money does not buy loyalty.

When the French took Algeria and politically and economically dominated the country, they could count on that country's co-opted local political elite to support them and facilitate things in the name of the French empire but, converting to Catholicism and Catholic norms was not one of those things. The Chinese of today can own oil and gas fields in the Sudan, but this right of ownership did not stop Sudan from splitting, causing a great deal of anxiety in Beijing as how to best manage their interests on both sides of a politically divided state. The substrata of the Sudanese conflict is about

religion and tribalism. Foreign money, if the economists are correct, should have prevented violence. After all, according to the neo-Liberal economic narrative, making money is the supreme human endeavour. Creating wealth ought to engender less domestic violence, less interstate violence.¹⁷ It should bring about societal evolution unencumbered by the historic human propensity for destruction. But this is a Calvinist utopia. In a multicultural, polymorphic world, hard power is adapting to new circumstances and is making a comeback. The Calvinist utopia of a neo-Liberal economic order, where international borders are sacrosanct, where there are no enemies, where old historical notions of animosity based on difference do not exist, where there are only friendly competitors, is a culturally biased paradigm.¹⁸ In the contemporary African context, only the elite who are currently benefitting from the status quo ante can see things from this unrealistic perspective. As the custodians and the gatekeepers of the resources of Africa, they believe that all other powers have signed on to neo-Liberalism without question. This assumption is a mistake.

As we have seen through our historical analysis, the pull of Islam and the non-materialist notions imbedded within this religious philosophy, stand in stark contrast and in opposition to the materialist neo-Confucian model of economic development of China, where what you own and control means everything.

What does this mean in a neo-colonial context?

It means that at one level, there is the subtle control that the GCC states *can* exercise over the northern part of the African continent through their shared religious belief of Islam – a religion that grew out of an old Arab trading culture which survived the exigencies of the European colonial experience. This, versus the overt control of contemporary China, where ownership of property, infrastructure and to a significant degree, the means of labour, is ‘nine-tenths of the law’. The important thing to remember in relation to Africa is that the sectarian divide between a predominantly Muslim north and non-Muslim south is not mutually exclusive. There are non-Muslim minorities in northern Africa, just as there are Muslim minorities in southern Africa. This reality gives added complexity if we attempt to quantify ideas such as external control over African resources in an emerging contest between China & the GCC. The reality is that Africans, Non-Muslim and Muslim alike will entertain

business with anyone. But when deals are important enough and trust is an issue, North Africans may very well prefer the use of Muslim business networks and sources of funding to others.

Obviously, as mentioned before, there are the other foreign actors that still need to be inculcated into this mix. The EU and the US are both wary of the rise of Islam and its spread into traditionally non-Muslim areas of Africa. They are also wary of China's economic dominance in Africa. Neither can stop Islam or China expanding their respective spheres of influence, and, failing an ability to project themselves as attractive economic/cultural alternatives, the EU and US may be, at least in the near term, peripheral players – albeit significant ones.

So what are we left with? More questions than answers, certainly. The empirical data still needs to be collated in order to paint a more accurate picture. But there is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that China's current economic hold over Africa, both north and south, may diminish over time. Having missed the opportunity presented by the voyages of the Treasure Fleet of Zheng He, China did not find root in Africa until well into the country's post-1978 economic opening. This left the field open to Arab traders and Muslim proselytisers to create deep roots for Islam in Africa. The fact that European colonialism did not roll back this influence through force-of-arms in the 19th-20th Centuries, demonstrates the great staying power of Islam. That there is room for a true 'clash of civilisations' as environmental and population pressures build up, is obvious. The GCC, though nowhere near China in terms of population size, is significant. The Arab people are right next door to Africa, and this fact gives them a geographic advantage which they have enjoyed over centuries of trade, as well as social and cultural engagement.

China on the other hand, has deep pockets and ambition on its side. It is presently the most powerful actor on the African continent, whether cited in terms of internationally understood econometric measures, or the presence of Chinese companies and labourers in and among African states. It is also the youngest of the foreign actors on the African continent. Whether this 'youth' brings with it inexperience, only time will tell. But China, just like the Arab states of the GCC, feels the impending problems of domestic environmental degradation, the need to secure food and water resources, the need to secure the fuel for construction and

industry. China's disadvantage is its distance from Africa and the fact that Africans have only really traded extensively with the country since the early 1990s. Like the former European colonials, the Chinese who have been sent to Africa on long-term assignments to take care of Chinese owned assets or to work on Chinese funded infrastructure programs have noticed that issues of racism have emerged. Though not on the same scale and ferocity as during the European colonial era, enough antipathy has been created between local African communities and imported Chinese staff and workers, that it may in time lead to worsening people-to-people relations. And while the fluid nature of African politics confounds most foreigners attempting to control events on the ground, there is more than enough evidence to suggest that things in the African lands under Islam are far from perfect. Outbreaks of violence between Muslim tribes, clans and communities are an ongoing feature of Muslim north Africa just as similar outbreaks of violence occurs among and between Muslims and non-Muslims, and among the non-Muslim communities. Perhaps this provides an opportunity for the Chinese to act as the 'financial interloper', playing wedge politics in order to cleave open economic opportunity where local political unity is hard to come by. In the end, Africa is again being set up as a chessboard. The interesting speculations are whether local interests will be totally subsumed by the interests of powerful external forces; and, in the apparent twilight of Western power, whether the only two contestants that count in Africa in the latter part of the 21st Century will be the Chinese and the Gulf Arab people.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ According to Ayodele and Sotola, Chinese FDI into Africa exceeded USD40 billion in 2012. See: Ayodele and Solota, *China in Africa: An Evaluation of Chinese Investment*, Initiative for Public Policy Analysis (IPPA), Working Paper Series, 2014, Lagos, Nigeria, p.5.
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- ³ See: Bakewell O., *Keeping Them in their Place: the ambivalent relationship between development and migration in Africa*, International Migration Institute (IMI), James Martin 21st Century School, University of Oxford Working Papers, 2007, Paper 8, Oxford, UK.
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- ⁵ US Overseas Loans and Grants, USAID, *Foreign Assistance Fast Fact FY 2012*, <http://gbk.eads.usaidallnet.gov/data/fast-facts.html> date accessed: 20/05/2014. Also see: Dagne T., *Africa: U.S. Foreign Assistance Issues*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report, September 15, 2011, Washington DC
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- ⁷ Deutsche Welle (DW), *Africa: US Shows New Interest in Africa*, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201404091515.html?viewall=1> date accessed: 20/05/2014
- ⁸ European Commission MEMO 13/367, *Key Facts of the Africa-EU Strategy*, European Commission, Brussels, 23 April, 2013, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-367_en.htm date accessed: 20/05/2014, Mix D.E., *The European Union: Foreign and Security Policy*, CSR Report, Congressional Research Service, Washington DC, April 8, 2013, pp.12-14; Deni J.R., *AFRICOM's Role in Shaping the Future in Africa*, in Focus Quarterly, Summer 2013, Vol.7, No.2, 2013 <http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/4407/africom-africa> date accessed: 20/05/2014 and Azikewe A., *The Militarization of the African Continent: AFRICOM Expands Co-operation with Europe*, Global Research: Centre for Research on Globalization, April 22, 2014, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-militarization-of-the-african-continent-africom-expands-operations-in-cooperation-with-europe/5378627> date accessed: 20/05/2014
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- ¹⁰ *Ming Emperor Yongle*, examiner.com, <http://www.examiner.com/article/the-ming-emperor-yongle-1402-1424> date accessed: 20/05/2014
- ¹¹ See: Levathes L., *When China Ruled the Seas: the Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne 1405-1433*, Oxford University Press, 1994, Oxford, UK, pp.20-21.
- ¹² Levtzion N., *History of Islam in Africa*, Ohio University Press, Athens Ohio, 2000, p.296.
- ¹³ See: El Qorchi M., Maimbo S.M. & Wilson J.F., *Informal Funds Transfer Systems: An Analysis of the Informal Hawala System*, International Monetary Fund, Washington DC, 2003
- ¹⁴ As epitomised by the 1955 Bandung Conference which was created to build Afro-Asian solidarity, see: Tan S. & Acharya A., (eds.), *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order*, National University of Singapore Press, 2008, pp.2-6.
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