INTO AFRICA

As China becomes a major influence in Africa, it faces mounting resistance and a profound dilemma: How does a nation devoted to nonintervention become a global power?

By Joshua Kurlantzick

ANDREW HEAVENS/REUTERS

In April, a woman in Ethiopia walked past a banner for a Chinese restaurant, a sign of China's increasing influence in Africa.

EMBARKING UPON A 12-day tour of Africa earlier this year, Chinese President Hu Jintao likely expected a warm welcome. Over the past five years China had emerged as a new power on the continent: Trade between China and Africa is growing by nearly 50 percent annually, Beijing may soon become Africa's top aid donor, and in the winter China hosted nearly every African leader for a historic summit in Beijing. On Hu's previous trip to the continent, in 2004, African leaders basked in China's new interest.

But this time around, Hu found a far different welcome. Though he received polite applause from leaders across Africa, he had to cancel part of his trip to Zambia amid fears of street protests over poor safety records at a Chinese-owned mine there. In South Africa and other countries, he faced condemnation in the media for China's human rights abuses, while across the continent African opinion leaders wondered why China was not doing more to help stop the genocide in Darfur. Before Hu's visit, Nigerian militants had kidnapped Chinese workers; in April, Ethiopian militants killed nine Chinese oil workers.

"The Chinese used to be more populist," a spokesman for the militants told reporters. "But now they are turning into colonialists themselves. First there were the Russians, then the Americans, now it is them."

This souring romance may show the limits of China's Africa strategy. Until now, China has focused on trade, aid, and diplomacy on the continent — emphasizing its "soft power," and vowing that it will not get involved in other countries' domestic politics. It is a strategy that is consciously different from that of the United States, which has emphasized its "hard power" through its military and counterterrorism cooperation with many African states. The US also sometimes takes a hard line, criticizing African governments' poor political and economic leadership.

But now China faces a decision that has implications far beyond Africa. As it grows into a great power, China's footprint on the continent will rapidly expand, and the country can no longer avoid responsibility for its actions — or, as in Darfur, its lack of action. If it stays aloof, it may alienate average people around the world. But if it begins to intervene in the domestic affairs of others, it abandons the core of the strategy it has crafted to woo foreign countries.

"Nonintervention is our brand," boasted Zhou Yuxiao, a Chinese official, during a visit to South Africa last fall, "like intervention is the Americans' brand."

And it is Africa, the first place outside of Asia where China is exerting its influence, that may show what kind of power Beijing will become — and give America clues on how to handle a rising China.

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For years, China ignored most of the world. As Deng Xiaoping came to power in the late 1970s, he pleaded with his country, ruined by years of backward economic policies, to focus on China's own development. But over the past decade, China's breakneck economic growth fostered greater confidence within the Chinese public, and intellectuals began calling for the nation to take a larger role in global affairs.

A more confident Chinese leadership has chosen to demonstrate its appeal first in parts of the developing world, which offers a blank slate for Beijing, since most people in the developing world know little about China's record on human rights. Certainly, Chinese leaders also must have realized that Africa was a low priority for the United States, and if China could play a major role in Africa, it could stake its claim as a great global power, able to influence events far from its own neighborhood. Not coincidentally, Africa also offered a battleground with China's bitter rival Taiwan, along with untapped natural resources — West Africa alone contains more than 80 percent of new global oil reserves.

China's aid programs have been critical to its charm offensive in Africa. From almost nothing a decade ago, the country has emerged as probably one of the five biggest donors on the continent, and at a summit last month, Chinese leaders announced they would offer Africa $20 billion in new financing. Unlike some Western donors, Beijing does not insist on economic or political reforms in exchange for aid. China's new, more savvy diplomats — one 2005 report said half of China's foreign service were 35 years old or younger — take pains to advertise Beijing's largesse.

Some of China's aid explicitly goes to programs to soften its image. While the United States has created fortress-like embassies and retreated from public diplomacy, Beijing promotes Chinese culture and language across the African continent. It has done so by creating Confucius Institutes in places like Nairobi, and Chinese-language programs at leading local universities. As the United States once did with the Peace Corps, China has begun to emphasize people-to-people contacts, for example launching a program to bring idealistic young Chinese to developing nations for volunteer projects.

"If one nation-state is able to make its power appear reasonable in the eyes of another people, then its desires will encounter less resistance," mused Wang Huning of the Central Committee's Policy Research Office.

Until recently, China's charm offensive appeared to be working. Polls in nations like South Africa showed more than 60 percent of people viewed China warmly, and the local media enthused about how the country's voracious demand for resources has given commodity-dependent African states a new lease on life, and a chance to reduce Africa's crippling trade deficits by exporting resources to China.

Many African leaders, who had failed to slash poverty rates using Western economic reforms, saw in Beijing a model of successful development. The president of the African Development Bank, the continent's major lending institution, urged his colleagues to study how China developed.

But popular opinion is beginning to turn. Because China was a relative newcomer to Africa, for several years it enjoyed a grace period with local activists. But a series of accidents at Chinese-owned mines and companies in Africa, highlighted in the local media, made many Africans question whether China was exporting its own poor labor and environmental standards. After accidents at a Chinese-owned copper mine in Zambia killed some 50 Zambians, workers protested against China, and ultimately some Zambians targeted Chinese-owned shops in Lusaka.

African civil society, which once welcomed China as an alternative to the West, also has begun to make its voice heard. Many African activists realize that the conditions Western lenders propose — conditions designed to make sure aid follows labor and environmental standards — help ensure money goes to social welfare. The International Rivers Network, a global environmental group, recently revealed that China supported the Merowe Dam, a project in Sudan that might have displaced as many as 70,000 people. Justica Ambiental, a Mozambican NGO, sent representatives to Shanghai this month to launch similar complaints about a China-backed dam in Mozambique.

Some African leaders also have begun to wonder if the continent is headed for a new mercantilism — if China will buy Africa's resources and sell it manufactured products, doing little to upgrade Africans' skills.

"The key must be mutual benefit," Trevor Manuel, the finance minister of South Africa told a group of Chinese officials. "Otherwise we might end up with a few holes in the ground where the resources have been extracted, and all the added value will be in China."

Now China is beginning to see that it cannot cultivate only leaders and ignore unions, newspapers, and NGOs like Justica Ambiental either in Africa or in other parts of the world. To soothe fears in South Africa that China will destroy local industries, Beijing agreed to self-imposed quotas on imports of Chinese textiles, and Hu has emphasized that China wants an equitable trade relationship with Africa.

Then there is Darfur. Over the past decade, as Sudan developed a major oil industry, China's leading oil companies have invested some $10 billion, making them critical to that nation's economy; China also sold arms to the Sudanese government and repeatedly blocked any United Nations actions against Khartoum. When reports of mass killing first emerged in Darfur in 2004, some Chinese diplomats wrote them off as hype created by America, which they believe never misses an opportunity to criticize Beijing.

But by 2007, it became clear that Darfur was not only a concern of Western human rights groups. African leaders themselves called for solutions to the crisis, and some of Africa's elite wondered why China, a country that supposedly stood on the side of developing nations, stood by silently as the leaders of one of those nations eliminated their own people.

After three years of unflinchingly backing Khartoum, this spring a top Chinese official suddenly realized there were refugees in Darfur, and visited refugee camps there. China then openly attempted to push Khartoum to allow a peacekeeping force into Darfur, and appointed a special envoy to Sudan. In the past year, top Chinese officials have also pointedly ignored Zimbabwe, another pariah that has been a friend of Beijing.

If China doesn't change, it will reap the results. Already, in other parts of the world, Beijing's soft power has not made up for its backing of dictators; in Burma, locals have taken out their frustration at Beijing's support through violence against Chinese migrants. If Beijing is not careful, it will find its Burma headache repeated across the African continent — and, potentially, the world.

Vaccines *Continued from page C1*

cine caused permanent brain damage. Wilson reported the stories of 22 children who suffered from epilepsy or mental retardation following vaccination. The British media hailed Wilson's report as fact and the percentage of children immunized dropped from 80 to 30. During the next few years, 300,000 children in England were hospitalized and 70 killed by pertussis.

By the late 1970s fears of pertussis vaccine had spread to the United States. Before jurors persuaded more by emotional appeals than by science, lawyers successfully claimed that the pertussis vaccine caused sudden infant death syndrome (later found to be associated with sleep position), Reye's syndrome (later found to be associated with aspirin), unexplained coma, paralysis, mental retardation, and epilepsy.

Seven companies stopped making the vaccine; within a few years only one, Lederle Laboratories, remained. Lederle was punished for its persistence. In 1986 a jury awarded $1.13 million to parents claiming that Lederle's pertussis vaccine had paralyzed their son — an award that was more than half of the annual sales of the vaccine. Subsequent studies of hundreds of thousands of children showed that the risk of permanent brain damage was the same in children who had not received the vaccine as in those who had.

Facing further litigation, vaccine makers were poised to leave the business. To save vaccines, the federal government stepped in, creating in 1986 the National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act. Designed to put an end to unfounded lawsuits, the act included the Vaccine Injury Compensation Program. Now, if parents want to sue for damages caused by vaccines, they first have to go through a federal claims court.

This "vaccine court" established a list of compensable injuries and lessened frivolous litigation. Children actually hurt by vaccines — such as those paralyzed by the oral polio vaccine or those with severe allergic reactions to egg proteins in the influenza vaccine — were compensated quickly, generously, and fairly. On the other hand, people whose claims had been disproved by epidemiological evidence — such as those claiming that the hepatitis B vaccine caused multiple sclerosis — weren't compensated. The bleeding stopped.

Unfortunately, the legacy of the pertussis litigation remains. Many pharmaceutical companies that abandoned vaccines never came back. At the beginning of the 1980s, 18 companies made vaccines; by the end of the decade, only four were left.

The infrastructure to make vaccines became tenuous, and vaccine shortages became commonplace. For example, in 1998, the tetanus vaccine was in such short supply that its use was restricted to emergency rooms. Beginning in 2000, a pneumococcal vaccine for children — designed to prevent bloodstream infections, meningitis, and a common cause of pneumonia — was available only intermittently; parents could only hope that their children weren't among the thousands permanently harmed or killed every year by pneumococcus.

Between 2003 and 2004 an influenza epidemic created a demand that dramatically exceeded supply; more than 150 children died that year from influenza. Since 1996 severe shortages have occurred for 10 of the 16 vaccines routinely given to children and adolescents. All of these shortages resulted in a delay in getting vaccines, and some children never got the vaccines they had missed.

Now, vaccine makers are again threatened. Lawyers will argue that either the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine or a mercury-containing preservative (thimerosal) in vaccines or the combination of the two can cause autism. This theory has been advanced on television shows such as 60 Minutes, in popular magazines like Time and Newsweek, and on national radio programs such as Imus in the Morning. Most prominently, the mercury-causes-autism theory has been advanced by a parents advocacy group called Safe Minds — a group now at the center of the litigation.

Certainly there is plenty of evidence to refute the notion that vaccines cause autism. Fourteen epidemiological studies have shown that the risk of autism is the same whether children received the MMR vaccine or not, and five have shown that thimerosal-containing vaccines also do not cause autism. Further, although large quantities of mercury are clearly toxic to the brain, autism isn't a consequence of mercury poisoning; large, single-source mercury exposures in Minamata Bay and Iraq have caused seizures, mental retardation, and speech delay, but not autism.

Finally, vaccine makers removed thimerosal from vaccines routinely given to young infants about six years ago; if thimerosal were a cause, the incidence of autism should have declined. Instead, the numbers have continued to increase. All of this evidence should have caused a quick dismissal of these cases. But it didn't, and now the courthas turned into a circus. The federal and civil litigation will likely take years to sort out.

Autism can be a heartbreaking disorder, often draining parents emotionally and financially. Although many promising genetic, epidemiological, and biological studies have been published during the past few years, autism remains a disorder without a known cause or cure. This has been enormously frustrating for parents.

It would be nice if there were someone or something to blame. We could blame the government and use the federal vaccine compensation program to pay for care. Or we could blame vaccine makers, and get them to pay in civil court. But if vaccine makers — faced with large awards for a problem that wasn't their fault — make the same decisions they did in the early 1980s, all American children will suffer, including those with autism. Then, we'll have only ourselves to blame.

SAMUEL ASHFIELD/PHOTO RESEARCHERS

A baby receives a vaccine for diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis, diseases that used to kill thousands of Americans every year.