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# A rising China counters US clout in Africa

Trade drives political role ahead of Zimbabwe's election.

**By Abraham McLaughlin**, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

March 30, 2005, 12:03 p.m. ET

## **HARARE, ZIMBABWE**

The Chinese economic juggernaut and its thirst for minerals and markets has increasingly brought it to Africa, including here to Zimbabwe. The fertile hills of this Southern African nation are rich with gold and the world's second-largest platinum reserves. In Sudan, Angola, and along the Gulf of Guinea, the Asian giant is guzzling the continent's vast oil supply.

But lately the Chinese are digging on a different front, one that could complicate the Bush administration's efforts to promote democracy here: African politics.

Last year, China stymied US efforts to levy sanctions on Sudan, which supplies nearly 5 percent of China's oil and where the US says genocide has occurred in its Darfur region. And as Zimbabwe becomes more isolated from the West, China has sent crates of T-shirts for ruling-party supporters who will vote in Thursday's parliamentary elections.

In addition, China or its businesses have reportedly:

- provided a radio-jamming device for a military base outside the capital, preventing independent stations from balancing state-controlled media during the election campaign;
- begun to deliver 12 fighter jets and 100 trucks to Zimbabwe's Army amid a Western arms embargo; and
- designed President Robert Mugabe's new 25-bedroom mansion, complete with helipad. The cobalt-blue tiles for its swooping roof, which echoes Beijing's Forbidden City, were a Chinese gift.

China is increasingly making its presence felt on the continent - from building roads in Kenya and Rwanda to increasing trade with Uganda and South Africa. But critics say its involvement in politics could help prop up questionable regimes, like Mr. Mugabe's increasingly autocratic 25-year reign.

"Suffering under the effects of international isolation, Zimbabwe has looked to new partners, including China, who won't attach conditions, such as economic and political reform" to their support, says a Western diplomat here. Of China's influence on this week's elections, he adds, "I find it hard to believe the Chinese would push hard for free and fair elections - it's not the standard they're known for."

Indeed, Mugabe often praises China and Asia as part of his new "Look East" policy. He responded to tough questions from an interviewer on Britain's Sky News last year about building his \$9 million new home, while millions of Zimbabweans live on the verge of starvation, by saying: "You say it's lavish because it is attractive. It has Chinese roofing material, which makes it very beautiful, but it was donated to us. The Chinese are our good friends, you see."

China is becoming good friends to many African nations, as the US has been. Between 2002 and 2003, China-Africa trade jumped 50 percent, to \$18.5 billion, Chinese officials say. It's expected to grow to \$30 billion by 2006. US-Africa trade was \$44.5 billion last year, according to the Commerce Department. As the world's largest oil importer behind the US, China has oil interests in Sudan, Chad, Nigeria, Angola, and Gabon. The US is also hunting for oil in Africa, with about 10 percent of imports coming from the continent.

Not all of China's activities in Africa are controversial. Under the auspices of the UN, the China-Africa Business Council opened this month, headquartered in China, to boost trade and development. It has peacekeepers in Liberia and has contributed to construction projects in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Zambia, though critics say it is using these projects to garner goodwill that it can tap into during prickly issues like Taiwan's independence or UN face-offs with the US.

Here in Zimbabwe, China also may be helping to support one of Africa's more oppressive regimes. The radio-jamming equipment that has prevented the independent Short Wave Radio Africa from broadcasting into the country is Chinese, according to the US-funded International Broadcast Bureau.

Reporters Without Borders, a group dedicated to freedom of the press, based in Paris, had this to say about the jamming: "Thanks to support from China, which exports its repressive expertise, Robert Mugabe's government has yet again just proved itself to be one of the most active predators of press freedom."

A Chinese diplomat here insists the equipment didn't come from China. And he says the T-shirts, which reportedly arrived on Air Zimbabwe's new direct flight from Beijing, were "purely a business transaction." But he adds that China-Zimbabwe relations have recently "been cemented in the field of politics and business."

In return for its support, China has received diplomatic backing on Taiwan's independence, as it has from many African nations.

Ultimately, China's expansion into Zimbabwe and Africa is more narrow than the 1800s colonization by European powers, when "Christianity, civilization, and commerce" were the buzzwords. For China, it's all about economics. "They've said: 'If you agree to privatize and sell to us your railways, your electricity generation, etc. - we will come in with capital,'" says John Robertson, an economist based in Harare.

With an economy that has shrunk as much as 40 percent in five years, Zimbabwe's government uses these promises to put off critics. "The government says, 'The Chinese are coming, and they'll bring in billions of dollars in investment, and soon everything will be fully restored,' " Mr. Robertson says.



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