

# AFRICA'S NEWEST FRIENDS

By Ghislain L. Legault

*China's foray into Africa has affected the small country of Gabon in many ways, including a serious impact on the natural environment. A Gabonese citizen working with the UN offers his perspective on China's aims in his country.*

It has been more than 30 years since China has established diplomatic relations in Africa. But, like all matters relating to China's enormous expansion around the world since 2000, the presence of China has become more visible in Africa in recent years. China hopes, through the colossal aid it provides to Africa (aid is expected to double between 2006 and 2009)<sup>1</sup> to gain a huge potential in terms of the opening of new economic markets. Let's recall that between 2000 and 2005, trade increased fivefold, an amount exceeding US\$50 billion, making China Africa's third largest economic partner, after the European Union and the United States.

Such relationships may seem idyllic given the vital need of the African continent for social and economic partnerships. The money—almost without limit—offered by the People's Republic of China (PRC) seems to be manna falling from the sky at a time when the traditional relations uniting Africa to the West seem to be disappearing.

Indeed, China has attracted and seduced the continent through its emphasis on the common foundation of a culture of struggle against imperialism (a reference to the colonization in Africa by the West), and the development of a "South-South" relationship, in which China is the champion.

The small African country of Gabon illustrates this new state of affairs. With a population of 1.4 million, Gabon is located right on the equator and has an incomparable wealth of natural resources, including petroleum, manganese, uranium, and diamonds.

At the same time, Gabon is home to one of the best pre-

served equatorial forests, an ecological treasure covering 22 million hectares, or 85 percent, of the country's territory.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the excellent work of such organizations as Wildlife Conservation Society, since 2002, Gabon has taken the initiative to allocate ten percent of its territory as national parkland, while devoting 13 national parks to ecotourism.<sup>3</sup> Some have called this salutary initiative "Green Gold," in contrast with the nickname for oil, "Black Gold."

Among these parks, Loango has been a model with its 1,550 square kilometers.<sup>4</sup> However, following the visit of the Chinese President, Hu Jintao, in February 2004 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, a license for natural resource exploration within this "protected" park was granted to the Chinese company, SINOPEC.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, 16,000 explosions of dynamite were used to probe the subsoil, which provoked the anger of several local NGOs. This was met with total indifference by the PRC government which, with the complicity of the Gabonese government, continues its industrial activities at the expense of environmental preservation.

Another example shows that the Chinese government tends not to bother with the long-term consequences of their economic investments abroad. One of the richest iron mines in the world lies in the northeast of Gabon in an area called Belinga. Discovered in the 1960s by the French, the mine was never exploited due to the high cost of transporting the ore from the forest. However, in 2004, the government granted Chinese companies the exclusive right to extract iron from Belinga and export it from Gabon. The Gabonese government has never revealed how the Chinese won the project, over other bidders from Brazil and other countries, nor the terms of these lucrative contracts. This despite the fact that the NGO, Brainforest, which is a signatory to the coalition, "Publish What You Pay (Publiez ce que Vous

Payez),”<sup>6</sup> has constantly asked the Gabonese government to publish the terms of the contract between the two countries. The extent of potential environmental damage is causing concerned cries from environmental NGOs.

The exploitation of this rich iron mine will require railroads to be built through several forests, including some of the protected areas mentioned above, destroying a large part of this natural habitat. In addition, project officials are contemplating the construction of a dam in Ivindo, an area previously designated as protected forest, to supply hydroelectric power to the mine. Such a dam would destroy the Kongou Falls, one of the most beautiful waterfalls in central Africa, and also flood the Ivindo area, causing extensive and permanent damage to the region’s ecosystem.

The government has failed to carry out any impact studies on the Belinga mine, despite incessant demands for such studies by numerous NGOs. Finally, in October 2007, the deputy prime minister in charge of ecology, Mrs. Georgette Koko, asked the Chinese companies

to stop work on construction of a road leading to the Kongou Falls, until such studies were done. Shortly thereafter, however, the Gabonese President overruled Mrs. Koko and work soon resumed.<sup>7</sup>

The Chinese attitude is interesting to note. Officially, the PRC remains absolutely silent, and in the name of the principle of “non-intervention,” remains ready to follow all measures taken by the Gabonese government. But would the Chinese government be ready to accept a measure that goes against its own interest? Would it accept measures to stop or limit its industrial projects in Africa, without applying pressure on the local government to remove such measures? Some people don’t hesitate to say that the Chinese use “soft power” tactics to get the job done in Africa.<sup>8</sup>

Here’s the whole equation of the expansion of China in Africa. The example of Gabon demonstrates the Chinese strategy to become a major partner of this continent. China’s offers of aid—in exchange for exclusive trade and commercial contracts—are always “unconditional.” For example, in January 2008, the minister for

**China’s President Hu Jintao (C) talks to Gabon’s President Omar Bongo (L) as he attends the Roundtable of Chinese and African Leaders during China-Africa Summit at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on November 5, 2006. Photo credits: REUTERS/Jason Lee.**



the economy, finance, budget and privatization, Paul Toungui, signed a framework agreement for the granting of a preferential loan in the amount of 37.2 billion CFA francs with the Chinese ambassador to Gabon, Xue Jinwei. This loan represents the “participation”<sup>9</sup> of the Chinese government in the Grand Poubara hydro-electric project, which is part of the Belinga mine project. The repayment rate of this appropriation is three percent and the repayment period is 20 years, including a grace period of seven years.

That is the issue with Chinese assistance to the African continent. Unlike Western countries and the World Bank which usually demand fulfillment of certain criteria before aid is given,<sup>10</sup> China never asks about the level of protection of human rights or imposes rules of transparency and good governance.

Asked about the ease with which China provides aid, some African elites answer with a certain irony that even if Western nations had officially demanded some guarantees of democracy before providing credits historically, these governments have often permitted—even supported—the same corrupt governments that have lead and controlled the economy in Africa for ages. The example of President Omar Bongo, who ruled Gabon for the last 40 years with the support of the French government, despite evidence of misappropriation of funds, shows the hypocrisy of the situation. At least with China, the deal is clear. While “struggling” with corruption in its own internal system, it is obvious that the PRC won’t ask for such promises from its new friends.

Moreover, the PRC does not seem to be embarrassed about the low standards of living provided to its Chinese workers in Africa. It is reported that Chinese workers are working in some African countries seven days a week with very low salaries. And this situation is implicitly condoned by the governments that tolerate that.

The African public opinion is divided on this topic. While African populations are aware of the dangers and the risks of China’s rising expansion (President Hu Jintao was forced to cancel his official visit in Mozambique, due to the threat of national protests following the death of local workers at a Chinese run mine), they also seem fascinated and attracted by the incomparable

facility of Chinese to adapt to any situation. And the hope of new jobs and social development helps also to welcome new friends!<sup>11</sup>

So the question is what is worse? Maybe *entre la peste et le cholera*,<sup>12</sup> the Africans seem to have made their choice. As for China, the answer is that they have opted for the gold.

## Notes

1. J.P. Thompson, “Le Grand Jeu de la Chine en Afrique” (The Big Game of China in Africa), September 26, 2007, <http://www.alternatives.ca/article3026.html>.
2. Nathan Grison, “Parcs Naturels et Manne Pétrolière au Gabon” (Parks and Oil in Gabon), Mappemonde, November 12, 2006, [http://mappemonde.mgm.fr/actualites/par\\_nat.html](http://mappemonde.mgm.fr/actualites/par_nat.html).
3. See Wildlife Conservation Society, “Gabon,” [www.wcs.org/international/Africa/gabon](http://www.wcs.org/international/Africa/gabon).
4. Grison.
5. *Ibid.*
6. The Publish What You Pay campaign aims to help citizens of resource-rich developing countries hold their governments accountable for the management of revenues from the oil, gas and mining industries. Publish What You Pay, “Welcome to the Publish What You Pay Website,” <http://www.publishwhatyoupay.org/english/>.
7. For photos, see Brainforest, “Les dernières images du massacre écologique par les chinois dans le Parc de l’Ivindo” (The latest images of the destruction by the Chinese in the Ivindo Park), January 2008, <http://www.brainforest.org/photosParIvindo/index.htm>.
8. Valerie Niquet, “China’s African Strategy,” *Politique étrangère*, 2e trimestre 2006.
9. This is the term used by the Gabonese government, but it is unclear what this participation entails.
10. See for example, articles 9, § 2 and 96, § 2 in *Agreement of Cotonou*, June 23, 2000, between the European Union and the APC States (Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific).
11. The Belinga mine project will create approximately 20,000 jobs, but most of these are slated for imported Chinese workers. It appears likely that Gabonese would only hold low-paying jobs, such as drivers.
12. “Between the plague and cholera.”