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No South Africa Visa for Dalai Lama: China's Growing Influence in Africa

By James Char

Synopsis

The Dalai Lama, who was to attend the 14th world summit of Nobel peace laureates, was last week refused a visa by South African authorities a third time in five years. This small measure of Chinese influence in the African continent reflects its growing confidence in its cross-regional policy.

Commentary

The Dalai Lama announced last week that he was cancelling his trip to the 14th World Summit of Nobel peace laureates owing to the South African government's refusal to grant him the necessary visa. While this has led to other Nobel laureates intimating that they would boycott the event, South Africa in all likelihood, will not shift from its pro-China stance.

South Africa has received criticism for bowing to Chinese pressure in the past. In 2009, it had barred the Tibetan spiritual leader and did so again when the retired Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu invited the Dalai Lama to his 80th birthday celebrations in 2011. Despite the bureaucratic explanations proffered, it is more likely that South Africa was simply deferring to China, which sees the Dalai Lama's campaign for meaningful Tibetan autonomy as a threat to Chinese "core interest". This latest episode reflects the growing influence of China's economic diplomacy in Africa.

Tools of the Trade: Economic Aid

China's diplomatic influence in Africa is largely facilitated through trade and aid. Since the 1990s, Africa has become a destination for Chinese investments as state-owned enterprises and entrepreneurs took up Jiang Zemin's call to further their business interests outside China. In order to diversify its trade with Middle Eastern countries for oil and gas resources in the 2000s, China also began to secure deals for Chinese firms to invest in the African energy sector.

During Hu Jintao's tenure, the African continent also became the major beneficiary of Chinese assistance, receiving 51.8% of China's total overseas aid from 2010 to 2012, up from the previous 2009 figure of 45.7% as highlighted in China's new white paper on foreign aid. Given its experience in developing its domestic economy, China – in collaboration with international institutions such as the

International Monetary Fund and the African Development Bank – has also been tasked with replicating the success of its Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in a number of African countries.

Since 2007, China has become Africa's biggest partner for its infrastructure sectors – outstripping its two former colonial masters, Britain and France. By tapping on a combination of equity finance and resource-backed loans (in which non-concessional loans are handed out to the recipient countries in return for the latter's mining or oil extraction rights), China has outpaced the World Bank as the leading provider of structural aid to Africa. China has also been the top trading country with Africa and overtook the US as the region's largest importer of oil in 2013. To say that China has become entrenched in the economic lifeblood of much of the African continent, therefore, is no overstatement.

Despite cases of labour rights abuses by Chinese enterprises operating in Africa and other negative reportage regarding China's mercantilist motivations in the region, both parties have proclaimed a mutually beneficial political and economic relationship. Indeed, those African states endowed with the raw materials needed by China have reaped the benefits of no longer having to depend on the US as well as their former European masters for trade. China's diplomatic policy of eschewing conditionality in facilitating trade and aid may also appeal to African leaders whose priorities lie with developing their own countries' domestic economies.

Confident Chinese Foreign Policy

Having grown richer and more powerful after a period of domestic consolidation, China has leveraged its economic strength in asserting a more confident version of its diplomacy. Especially on matters regarding its "core interests", China has not been afraid to retaliate against those countries whose views do not accord with its own. Similarly, China has not shied away from strident measures such as when it imposed an unofficial trade embargo on Norwegian salmon for Norway's role in awarding Liu Xiaobo the 2010 Nobel peace prize.

South Africa is not alone in rejecting the Dalai Lama; South Korea had barred him for a previous Nobel event in 2006 citing the implications it would have on trade with China. Interestingly, a day after the Dalai Lama's representative had been informed by South African authorities that his visa application had been rejected, it was mentioned on the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) that the same country was reiterating its commitment to enhance "bilateral economic relations" with China. China is after all South Africa's largest bilateral trading partner.

While the South African government had previously claimed that its decision to reject the Dalai Lama was based on concerns the Tibetan spiritual leader's visit may have on the country's hosting of the 2010 World Cup, it has yet to be revealed what kind of creative explanation it will come up with this time. Be that as it may, a more pertinent question remains: In the face of China's increasing confidence in executing its foreign policy in Africa as evidenced by its ability to impose its policy preferences, it will be interesting to see how developed nations led by the US and Europe will respond.

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