

Ahead of the curve: what Ian Taylor's 'China's foreign policy towards Africa in the 1990s' tells us about China's grand strategy today

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Biography

Steven Kuo is a Taiwan-born South African. He was Ian's PhD student between 2007–2012, working on a thesis focusing on China–Africa security relations. Alongside his academic position as Adjunct Senior Lecturer at the Graduate School of Business at the University of Cape Town, he currently also acts as a consultant on China–Africa relations

Abstract

Political support has long been the top priority and foundational consideration of Beijing's Africa policy in the United Nations and other international fora. Taylor's article highlighted the main drivers behind Beijing's policy towards Africa. His arguments on this point provided support for a great deal of his later publications arguing against the waves of the "Chinese resource neo-colonialism in Africa" discourse, which was all the rage throughout the 2000s and 2010s.

Keywords: [China–Africa relations](#); [China–Africa history](#); [China's Africa policy](#); [Chinese foreign policy](#); [African international relations](#)

Introduction

Ian Taylor was one of the pioneers in the study of China–Africa relations and has since become a colossus in the developing scholarly field of China–Africa studies. At the time Taylor started to engage with the topic (in the mid-1990s), China–Africa trade was negligible and there were limited significant political connections between Beijing and African capitals. Today, popular news stories frequently cast China as the alleged "new coloniser in Africa", while plenty of reports try to debunk these myths. A thriving research field has developed around all facets of Africa–China relations. Taylor was indeed ahead of the curve.

Ian Taylor's authoritative work on China–Africa relations not only fast-tracked his own career, but also cleared the way for scholars and think-tank researchers to follow on the path he had cleared. Taylor advanced the China–Africa Studies sub-discipline through his cutting-edge research that combined Chinese foreign policy analysis with fieldwork-based African studies. He also won research funding to nurture young scholars. For example, together with Oliver Richmond at the

Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies of the University of St Andrews, he secured the Allen and Nesta Ferguson Charitable Trust Scholarship for sub-Saharan African peace studies. Patrick Tom, Walter Lotze, Inga Jacobs and myself were among those who benefitted from this research grant, which allowed us to carry out our PhD research on African peace and conflict studies.

In the following, I will discuss one of Ian Taylor's first academic articles on China–Africa relations, entitled 'China's foreign policy towards Africa in the 1990s', which was published in 1998 in the *Journal of Modern African Studies (JMAS)*. By the mid-1990s, Ian had completed an M.Phil. thesis at the University of Hong Kong on *The People's Republic of China's anti-hegemonic posturing in the post-Cultural Revolution era in southern Africa* (Taylor, 1997). For the 1998 article, he drew on his M.Phil. research. The article filled a significant knowledge gap by accounting for and explaining developments in Africa–China relations throughout the 1990s, thereby carrying forward Yung-lo Lin's previous work on 'Peking's Africa policy in the 1980s' (Lin, 1989).

I have read this article many times, even prior to becoming Ian's PhD student. Later on, I prescribed it in my student reading lists. This article, for me, is the foundation of my personal understanding of Beijing's foreign policy. I feel it remains relevant today, as scholars and analysts continue their efforts to understand the Africa piece of the Chinese foreign policy puzzle. While popular accounts have often remained preoccupied with China's interest in Africa's natural resources, Taylor's 1998 article argues that securing African political support in international organisations, such as the United Nations, has been a driving factor behind Beijing's Africa policy. A quarter of a century on, Taylor's insistence that political support, and not necessarily economic advantages, is Beijing's top priority in Africa remains relevant, considering the intensifying geopolitical competition between China and the West. I claim that Beijing's Africa policy today – at the beginning of President Xi's third five-year term – is built on the foundations that Ian identified in his 1998 article.

Africa as a reliable political support base for China

Following scholars in the 1960s and 1970s (Hutchison, 1975; Larkin, 1971), Taylor situated China–Africa relations within the context of the Cold War and the superpower rivalry between the US and the USSR. In the same way that the superpowers had client states in Africa, albeit to a far lesser extent, China fostered revolutions in the continent (Ogunsanwo, 1974, p. 260). Compared to the previous two decades (the 1960s and 1970s), however, a decline was observed throughout the 1980s in the importance of Africa for Beijing. On the one hand, post-Cultural Revolution, Beijing had embarked on a policy of *détente* with the West, and the struggle against Western neo-imperialism had lost its significance (Li, 2006, p. 15). On the other, according to a point Taylor made in his unpublished M.Phil. thesis, Sino-Soviet rapprochement meant that 'China no longer saw the continent as an area where Beijing could or should combat either American or particularly Soviet influence' (quoted in Taylor, 1998, p. 445).

Deng Xiaoping's China in the 1980s was focused on economic reform and opening up to global markets. In order to achieve economic development, receiving support from Japan and the West

was a priority, while African camaraderie was secondary. Taylor's argument for China's neglect of Africa in the 1980s was not made haphazardly. In support of this view, Taylor references, among others, Philip Snow's work (Snow, 1995). As Taylor (1998, p. 444) shows, despite China's leading position as the world's fastest growing economy at the time, both aid to Africa and trade numbers between China and African countries had stagnated. In addition, Taylor (1998, p. 445) documents a significant drop in high-level visits from China to Africa from the mid-1980s onward, a trend which was quickly reversed after the Tiananmen Square incident. As Taylor (1998) sets out in the opening sentence of his article, '[t]he PRC's policy towards Africa in the 1990s has its roots in the crisis surrounding the Tiananmen Square crackdown on 4 June 1989, and the heavy and persistent criticism by the developed world levelled against Beijing's human rights record since that date' (p. 443). While Beijing found itself a pariah in the Western world, being roundly criticised for its handling of the Tiananmen Square incident, it found vocal support for its actions among African states. Taylor's article convincingly demonstrates that Tiananmen Square had become a "watershed" moment causing a rejuvenation of Sino-African relations.

Taylor's article remains a highly relevant contribution, not only because it provides a dispassionate and objective assessment of Africa's importance for Beijing, but also because it sheds light on the trilateral relationship among Africa, China and the West. Taylor (1998, p. 447), with his occasionally colloquial choice of words which made his articles all the more readable, argues that 'whilst Tiananmen Square ended China's "honeymoon" relationship with the West, Africa's reaction was far more muted, if not openly supportive', a claim he substantiates with statements from African statesmen lauding Beijing's reactions to the 1989 demonstrations.

Taylor discusses the changing Western attitudes *vis-à-vis* Beijing, which was originally seen in a favourable light by Western media and Western policy-makers, 'who saw/hoped that China was being remade as a Chinese imitation of the West's self-image' (Taylor, 1998, p. 446). As the realist John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago argues in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, the liberal triumphalism that pervaded the Washington establishment in the 1990s meant that spreading democracy and promoting an open international economy was considered an opportune foreign policy by US policy-makers. In the case of China, liberal reasoning assumed that, if the United States were to integrate the country into the global economy, China would eventually become a democracy once it had reached a certain level of economic development (Mearsheimer, 2021, p. 53). Mearsheimer laments that four US administrations, from George W.H. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush to the Obama administration, had all embraced this liberal ideology. He quotes Bill Clinton's 1994 declaration that the United States should 'intensify and broaden its engagement' with China, which would help it 'evolve as a responsible power, ever growing not only economically, but growing in political maturity so that human rights can be observed' (Mearsheimer, 2021, p. 53).

Following the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, Western criticism of China's human rights violations became frequent, vocal and a major concern for Chinese foreign policy formulation (Taylor, 1998, pp. 446–447). Taylor's scholarship on the matter was demonstrably good, especially for someone

who was, at the time, “only” a PhD candidate. He noted that Chinese officials saw other reasons as quintessential for Western criticism. He quotes an interview he had conducted in Stellenbosch in 1998 with the then Chinese Ambassador to South Africa, Wang Xue Xian, who held the view that the West ‘jump[ed] on human rights’ after China began to develop (quoted in Taylor, 1998, p. 447). Taylor (1998) also argues that Chinese and many African decision-makers shared the sentiment that ‘human rights such as “economic rights” and “rights of subsistence” are the main priority of developing nations and take precedence over personal, individual rights as conceptualised in the West’ (p. 448).

Taylor identifies three essential reasons why African governments openly supported Beijing in the post-Tiananmen era. First among those reasons was self-interest because African elites were themselves under threat from democratisation projects. On the African continent, ruling elites, many of which had questionable legitimacy domestically, were supportive of Beijing’s culturally relativist interpretations of human rights, and sympathetic towards the rationale that linked “stability” with one-party rule (Taylor, 1998, pp. 447–448). The second reason was Third World solidarity and shared resentment at Western interference in the affairs of fellow developing countries. Taylor (1998) notes that ‘[m]any African governments viewed the emphasis by the West on human rights as a pretext to undermine China’s development and interfere in its own path to modernisation’ (p. 448). Politically capitalising on African resentments against Western interventionism, Beijing rediscovered the roots of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, notably the foundational principles of sovereignty and non-interference, principles that were conveniently forgotten during the revolutionary period of the 1960s and 1970s, when Beijing supported revolutionary forces across Africa and Southeast Asia (Taylor, 1998, p. 451). The third and final reason was that criticising Beijing would spell the end of Chinese aid to African leaders (Taylor, 1998, pp. 447–449).

Following the Tiananmen Square incident, China launched a diplomatic offensive to win international support. Africa was central to these efforts. Taylor highlights that, in the three-year period between June 1989 and June 1992, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen toured fourteen African countries. These visits to “friendly” states in Africa usually included the granting of Chinese aid money, as in the case of Mozambique, which received US\$12 million in September 1989 (Taylor, 1998, p. 450).

African countries did not only serve as a diplomatic bulwark against Western criticism. The continent as a whole also became an arena of competition for diplomatic recognition and ties with the Republic of China on Taiwan. The so-called chequebook diplomacy between the “two Chinas” was raging in the late 1990s, whereby Beijing and Taipei competitively distributed aid across Africa in return for political support and/or diplomatic recognition (Taylor, 1998, p. 457). At the time, Taiwan still maintained official diplomatic relations with about thirty, mostly small countries, about a third of which was in Africa (Taylor, 1998, p. 457). Taipei’s chequebook diplomacy, however, was becoming increasingly less successful, especially when Taiwan lost its most important African diplomatic tie, South Africa. This was made official when Beijing opened an embassy in Pretoria in January 1998, despite a couple of years’ worth of vigorous lobbying from Taipei with the new Mandela

government. Today, Eswatini is the last African country maintaining diplomatic relations with Taiwan. As Taylor's article shows, African support for Beijing was becoming increasingly important to the People's Republic of China throughout the 1990s.

The enduring relevance of Taylor's *JMAS* article

By choosing to publish the article in the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Taylor brought the study of modern Chinese history and Chinese foreign policy analysis to an African Studies audience, thereby effectively linking Chinese studies with scholarship on African politics and international relations. By June 2023, Taylor's article had been cited 385 times according to Google Scholar, which underlines its impact.

The contribution of the article has been significant for at least two reasons. First, it effectively served to bridge two Area Studies disciplines: Chinese Studies and African Studies, thus laying the groundwork for the establishment of a new sub-field, China–Africa Studies. Thanks to his M.Phil. research, Taylor was one of the few scholars able to combine scholarship from two Area Studies traditions that scarcely shared any communication. Not only was he able to explain the impact of a rising China on Africa, but he also pointed out why and how African countries were important for Beijing. Second, Taylor accurately assessed Beijing's geopolitical calculations throughout the 1990s, revealing the importance of African support for the PRC against Western pressure on the international stage. As early as 1998, Taylor's article established that Africa, following the short-lived Sino-Western *détente* period of the 1980s, would become an arena for geopolitical and ideological rivalry between China and the West. He concludes that 'in an attempt to offset the West's position vis-à-vis China in the international system, Beijing has and will continue to seek improved relations with non-Western powers. Africa has been no exception to this policy and this is likely to continue' (Taylor, 1998, p. 460). Subsequent Chinese policies towards Africa, marked by milestones such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) inaugurated in 2000 (Taylor, 2011), China's Africa Policy White Paper published in 2006 (Taylor, 2009), the invitation of South Africa to the BRICS group at the end of 2010 (Taylor, 2014) and the centrality of Africa within the Belt and Road Initiative (Taylor and Zajontz, 2020), empirically prove his point. His assessment, dating back to 1998, that political support from Africa is a key Chinese foreign policy concern remains apt 25 years later in the light of intensifying great power rivalry between China and the West.

Endnotes

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges support by Tim Zajontz and the editorial team.

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