

# POLICY BRIEF

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## China, Africa and the WHO : a challenge for post covid19 multilateralism

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China plays a significant role in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, where the current Director-General of the WHO was Minister of Health and then Minister of Foreign Affairs. This opaque influence and the support given by Beijing to Dr. Tedros seems to have weighed on the positions taken by the WHO in the face of the Covid 19 crisis. The consequences of these decisions are now being felt worldwide and contribute to undermining the credibility of a fragile multilateral system.

### *China and Africa: Historically Strong Ties*

China rediscovered Africa in 1996. In May of that year, President Jiang Zemin visited six African countries: Kenya, Egypt, Ethiopia, Mali, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. In doing so, China, which since 1979 had been focused on its development following the implementation of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform policy, was returning to a tradition that allows it – until today – to capitalize on its status of “developing” country sharing the same experience. In the 1960s and 1970s, Beijing supported liberation movements in its favor, against Soviet “revisionism”. It was also the period of the “barefoot doctors” sent to several African countries to set up primary health care based on the Chinese model. It was also the time of the Tanzam Railway (Tanzania-Zambia) the first “model” infrastructure construction project, built between 1968 and 1973

From the 1980s onwards, the end of the Sino-Soviet conflict, the collapse of the USSR, and the reduction of ideological tensions with the West, as Beijing launched economic reform, The importance of Africa in China's strategic thinking has been for a time reduced.

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The mid-1990s marked a turning point. Several motivations drove the renewed interest in Africa: new needs for natural resources and energy, African Union support at the UN on issues of direct interest to the PRC, and a strategy focused on Taiwan aiming to reduce the island's diplomatic influence after the first election of a Taiwanese president by universal suffrage.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, President Jiang Zemin's visit laid the foundations for China's Africa policy "for a new era."<sup>3</sup> These principles, which are still valid today, are, in theory, "non-interference," "win-win" economic cooperation and equality.<sup>4</sup> From 2003 to 2013, Jiang Zemin's successor, Hu Jintao, did consolidate these developments by visiting 18 African countries in ten years. Xi Jinping has also symbolically dedicated his first trip abroad as President, to Africa in 2013 and did return in 2018. In nearly 25 years, Africa has thus become a major playing field for China's foreign strategy, well beyond the economy.

### ***An essential role at the United Nations***

From the outset, the weight of African union states at the UN has been an important factor for Beijing.<sup>5</sup> In 1996, General Xiong Guangkai wrote that "African states account for a third of the UN's membership."<sup>6</sup> Increased from 52 to 54, this weight has only increased and is still a major factor for the PRC on the international scene. After Tiananmen in 1989, and the sanctions that for a time hit China, the weight of African countries vote in commissions such

as the Human Rights commission played a significant role. In exchange for some African Union countries' support, China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, has regularly been able to veto sanctions against the most repressive African regimes such as Zimbabwe or Sudan.

The support of African countries also played a role in China's offensive against the G4 (Japan, Germany, India, Brazil) initiative launched in 2005, on the 60th anniversary of its creation, to reform the UN Security Council. For Beijing, this reform, initiated by Japan, was a direct threat to its capacity to influence and its very privileged status as the sole representative of Asian countries – and countries of the South – with a veto right at the UN.

At another level, China's strategies of influence in Africa from the mid-1990s onwards, supported by its rapid economic development, made it possible to reduce Taiwan's diplomatic weight considerably. While about twenty African countries recognized Taiwan in the early 1990s, only Swaziland is still present, since the defection of Burkina Faso in 2020.

### ***China's influence in international organizations and the role of the African Union vote***

The support of the African Union at the UN, and more generally of countries of the South that share the same "values," has also enabled the PRC to strengthen its influence in

2 In 1995-96, China attempted a campaign of military intimidation lasting several months with missile test launches off the island, interrupted by the dispatch of a US aircraft carrier in the Taiwan strait. This campaign contributed to the election of President Lee Teng-hui.

3 "This theme of the "new era" is a constant in Chinese ideological discourse.

4 Valerie Niquet, "Profit and Prejudice, China in Africa," *China News Analysis*, n° 1574, 15-12-1996.

5 Valerie Niquet, "La stratégie africaine de la Chine", *Politique étrangère*, 2006/2.

6 Xiong Guangkai, "China Defense Policy and Sino-African Relations," *International Strategic Studies*, No. 31997 in Valerie Niquet, "Profit and Prejudice, China in Africa," op.cit.

international organizations.<sup>7</sup> This development corresponds to the concept of “*central stage*” (舞台中心) used by Xi Jinping since he came to power. At the 19th Communist Party Congress in 2017, the Chinese president declared: “*China has now become a great power in the world. It is time for us to take a central place (走上世界舞台中心) on the world stage.*”

As a result, taking advantage, particularly in Africa, of its economic and diplomatic weight, China now heads four of the fifteen commissions under the UN, the only member of the Security Council to hold more than one. China now leads the international civil aviation organization, food and agriculture organization, the industrial development organization, and the international telecommunications union. All these organizations are directly related to China’s BRI connectivity projects, including the global development of 5G.

China has also been at the head of WHO (World Health Organization), with Dr. Margaret Chan, from 2013 to 2016, and has actively supported the candidacy of the organization’s current Director, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, elected in 2017. China’s support and choice of Dr. Tedros is another manifestation of the process of China’s direct or indirect takeover of international organizations. After the SARS crisis in 2003, the severity of the WHO denunciations worried the Chinese regime, which has since tried, to limit the scope of criticism by strengthening its capacity to influence.

This influence, in the case of the WHO, does not involve particularly large direct financial support, contrary to what has been said.

Since 2014, in relation to its demographic and economic weight, China’s official contribution has increased. However, it was only USD 18,948,900 in 2019, while that of the United States reached USD 58,991,024, and that of Japan USD 23,156,735. Voluntary contributions, which today constitute a majority share of WHO’s funding, were USD 86 million for China, while those of the United States reached USD 893 million in 2019.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, China has been able to build on the fallouts of its strategy of influence in Africa, which involves very substantial financing of prestigious projects linked to the governments in place, and investment programs vital for the development of infrastructures in the countries concerned.

***Strengthened economic dependency***

China became interested in the African continent as a source of raw materials and energy, as it became the world’s largest consumer of these commodities. Angola, for example, is one of China’s leading suppliers of oil. Gabon’s forests, poorly controlled, have been over-exploited by Chinese companies.<sup>9</sup> Africa is also an essential source of rare metals that are indispensable to China’s high tech industry. Finally, if it does not compensate for the large European and North American markets, the African market, especially for lower quality products produced by Chinese SMEs or telecommunication companies, is also significant.

The first Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), based on the Japanese model of the Tokyo International Conference on African

7 For instance, in November 2011, the Information Office of the State Council convened the second “South-South Human Right Forum” in Beijing. It planned to implement the “Beijing Declaration” which rejects the principle of universal values and defends the right to development as equivalent to Human Rights.  
 8 [https://www.who.int/about/finances-accountability/funding/AC\\_Status\\_Report\\_2019.pdf?ua=1](https://www.who.int/about/finances-accountability/funding/AC_Status_Report_2019.pdf?ua=1)  
 9 Valerie Niquet, Alain Touati, *La Chine en Afrique, intérêts et pratiques, essai d’analyse du mode de fonctionnement d’un système*, Les études de l’IFRI, Paris, 2008.

Development (TICAD) conferences inaugurated in 1993, was held in Beijing in 2000, bringing together 52 African Heads of State. The forum is held alternately in China and Africa every three years and has grown in size since 2006.

At another level, thanks to the considerable financial funds at its disposal, and a “flexibility” in decision-making that powers that respect more constraining norms of sustainable development, transparency and anti-corruption do not have, China became a major investors and lender in Africa. However, China is both a major lender in the framework of its BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) projects, while at the same time still a major borrower at the World Bank. At the G 20 meeting to suspend debt interests’ payments from countries hit by Covid19 that took place in April 2020, China agreed to sign with however a few caveats to exclude its BRI loans.<sup>10</sup>

Since 2010, China has also become Africa’s largest trading partner. Trade peaked at \$170 billion in 2017 and then slowed down as China’s economic growth slowed. Similarly, at its peak, according to official statistics, cumulative Chinese investment in Africa reached \$43 billion in 2017.<sup>11</sup>

### ***The case of Ethiopia***

Ethiopia, the country of origin of the current Director-General of WHO, occupies a special place in China’s Africa strategy. Although lacking in raw materials, China very quickly focused its interest on Ethiopia, with which it established diplomatic relations as early as 1970. Since the People’s Democratic Liberation Front came to

power in 1991, ideological ties between Beijing and Addis Ababa have been strengthened, including party-to-party ties with the Chinese Communist Party. The regional headquarters of the Xinhua agency, one of the principal organs of the Communist Party’s external propaganda apparatus, is located in Addis Ababa, as is the headquarters of the Sino-African Development Fund.<sup>12</sup>

China had also set up in 2017 an “Eastern Economic Zone,” specializing in the production and export of textile and leather products, agricultural products, metallurgy, building materials, The official presentation of this special economic zone insists on the fact that Ethiopia, due to its status as a developing country, enjoys privileged access to the North American and European markets, without quotas or customs duties, which explains the relocation movement of Chinese companies to this country.<sup>13</sup>

China is also the country’s largest source of foreign investment and Ethiopia’s largest trading partner. These investments, 147 more projects accepted in 2019, concern the infrastructure sector, including the construction of a high-speed line to Djibouti, where China (APL) has a logistics base since 2018. China has also enabled Ethiopia to launch its first remote sensing satellite, ETRSS-1, in 2019.

Ethiopia is also very dependent on the “status” that China confers on it. In 2003, the second FOCAC forum was held in Addis Ababa. China fully financed and built the headquarters of the African Union, which was inaugurated in December 2012, symbolically making Ethiopia the “*capital of Africa*”<sup>14</sup>

10 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2020-04-27/chinese-debt-could-cause-emerging-markets-implode>

11 人民日报, (*People’s Daily*), 30-08-2018.

12 Jean-Pierre Cabestan, «China and Ethiopia, Authoritarian Affinities and Economic Cooperation,» *China Perspectives*, 2012-4.

13 “Ethiopia Eastern Industrial Zone,” *China Daily*, 13-02-2019.

14 “Jean-Pierre Cabestan, op.cit.

Most significantly, the new *African Center for Diseases Control*, established in 2017, is headquartered in Addis Ababa, and China has offered to build this headquarters for \$80 million.<sup>15</sup> It is through this center, in Ethiopia, that products supplied by China for the fight against Covid19 in Africa must also transit before being redistributed.

***The role of Mr. Tedros and the positioning of the WHO***

It is in these many capacities that questions have been raised about the role of the new WHO Director-General elected in May 2017 with the support of. Today in charge of managing the coronavirus crisis, he is a former cadre of the Marxist-Leninist Liberation Front of Tigray, supported by China (and Albania) against the Addis Ababa authorities close to Moscow in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>16</sup> He was successively Minister of Health from 2005 to 2012 and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2013 to 2017. In both cases, his position implied close relations at the state, political and economic levels with China, which had become an unavoidable partner of Ethiopia.

As soon as he was elected head of the WHO, Mr. Tedros supported the Chinese proposal to appoint former President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe as “*Goodwill Ambassador for WHO*,” before retracting in the face of strong opposition. Likewise, as the official Chinese press immediately reported, he assured Beijing, upon his election, that WHO would continue to adhere

to the “one China” principle, following China’s desire to no longer grant Taiwan observer status, under the name “Chinese Taipei,” in force from 2009 to 2016.<sup>17</sup> Whatever its merits as a biologist, it is its status as “representative of the global South” and more particularly of a continent and a country where China’s influence is considerable, which weighed in Beijing’s choice to support its candidacy, as a way of preserving its own influence with the WHO.

In a speech at the *Peking University Public Policy International Forum* on March 14, 2017, a few months before his election, Tedros, still minister of foreign affairs, said that “*China-Africa cooperation on health is a model of South-South cooperation*.”<sup>18</sup> In 2018, on the occasion of a new visit to China, Tedros also declared, according to the official website of the WHO, that China, whose “*health system is a model*,” could “*improve the health of 60 million people in the more than sixty countries involved in the BRI*”. It called for strengthening the “*strategic partnership between China and the WHO*” and enhancing cooperation with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project in the field of health.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, a Chinese diplomat, Mr. Fu Cong is an advisor to the Director general.

***What are the consequences for WHO’s dealing with the coronavirus crisis?***

Established in 1948, WHO plays the leading role in the prevention of epidemics and the management of health crises. Its voice is

15 <https://www.ft.com/content/cef96328-475a-11ea-aeb3-955839e06441>

16 Tefera Negash Gebregzibher, «Ideology and Power in TPLF Ethiopia,» *African Affairs*, vol. 118, issue 472, July 2019 sur <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adz005>

The Tigray Liberation front has been part of the governing coalition since the takeover in 1991.

17 [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-05/25/content\\_29490343.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-05/25/content_29490343.htm) The PRC opposed the maintenance of this status after the election of president Tsai Ing-Wen. Conversely, China had accepted this status to support the Kuomintang, which was more favorable to Beijing’s views, while it was in power.

18 “加强南南合作提高全球健康水平”(Strengthening South-South cooperation, raising the level of global health) on [http://www.chinafrica.cn/chinese/focus/201703/t20170315\\_800091452.html](http://www.chinafrica.cn/chinese/focus/201703/t20170315_800091452.html)

19 «Building from Strength, Extending the Strategic Partnership with China,» 18-07-2018 sur <https://www.who.int/china/news/detail/18-07-2018-building-from-strength-expanding-the-strategic-partnership-between-who-and-china>

authoritative in public perception of health threats and government decision-making. According to the WHO International Health Regulations revised in 2005 after the SARS crisis to answer China’s lack of cooperation, which are legally binding for all 196 countries in the world, the principles of transparency, diligence in reporting the emergence of an epidemic, and respect for human rights and individual freedoms must govern the management of a health crisis. The degree of urgency defined by WHO weighs on the measures adopted by States.

In this respect, China’s management of the covid19 crisis, relayed by the WHO, is problematic.<sup>20</sup> While uncertainty remains about the first cases, on 30 December, a group of doctors mentioned in a private WeChat discussion the worrying increase in SARS-type pneumonia in Wuhan.<sup>21</sup> The seven doctors, including Dr. Li Wenliang, were summoned on 3 January by the Wuhan security bureau and ordered to publish a retraction for spreading “false rumors.”<sup>22</sup>

On 31 December, China’s Public Health Committee reported to WHO “41 cases of pneumonia of unknown origin.”<sup>23</sup> On the same day, Taiwan also reported suspect cases in Wuhan, mentioning that they were “isolated” from other patients. However, Taiwan’s – not

and WHO member – warning was not taken into account. On January 1, the Wuhan wet market closed and was disinfected, the live animals destroyed. These actions made it impossible to trace the disease back to the coronavirus intermediate animal carrier. A “temporary” national ban on trade in live animals and wildlife was then put in place before becoming, in theory, permanent.<sup>24</sup> On 14 January, Wuhan health commission declared that there was no evidence of human-to-human transmission before the city organized a huge New Year’s banquet.

Following a short inspection visit to Wuhan on 20-21 January 2020, a WHO experts team issued a report stating that “sources suggest that human-to-human transmission is occurring in Wuhan. However, further analysis is needed to understand the extent of this transmission.”<sup>25</sup> The delegation also noted “China’s rapid identification of the virus, its genetic sequencing and the provision of strains to make it possible to manufacture tests.” At the same time, on 3 January, the National Health Commission reportedly ordered laboratories that had begun work on virus sequencing to stop their work and destroy the samples. The genome sequence was not released, by a Shanghai laboratory, until January 11 and then shared with the WHO.<sup>26</sup>

Despite these elements, official Chinese

20 Peter Husson, «China Helped Put this Man in charge of the WHO, is it Paying Off?», *The National Interest*, 23-03-2020.

21 新冠肺炎“吹哨人”李文亮：真相最重要 (For the “whistleblower” Li Wenliang it was the truth that was most important), 07-02-2020 on <http://china.caixin.com/2020-02-07/101509761.html>

22 Dr. Li Wenliang died on February 7 from Covid 19.

23 “Pneumonia of Unknown Cause in China,” 05-01-2020 on <https://www.who.int/csr/don/05-january-2020-pneumonia-of-unkown-cause-china/en/>.

24 In 2003, following the SARS crisis, strict regulations had already been put in place. With no results. According to some sources, wet market selling live animals already reopened in less visible districts and cities. See: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-08/wuhan-is-returning-to-life-so-are-its-disputed-wet-markets>

25 “Mission Summary, WHO Field Visit to Wuhan,” 22-01-2020 at <https://www.who.int/china/news/detail/22-01-2020-field-visit-wuhan-china-jan-2020>.

26 Gao Yu et al., «How Early Signs of Coronavirus were Spotted, Spread and Throttled in China,» 28-02-2020 sur <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/how-early-signs-of-the-coronavirus-were-spotted-spread-and-throttled-in-china>

statements both in Wuhan and at the central level did continue to minimize the contagiousness of the new coronavirus. At the same time, the WHO visiting team indicated that “the protocols shared by Chinese experts would be used to implement international recommendations for infection control, clinical management, and case definition.”<sup>27</sup> “The lack of reliable statistics on the number of infections and especially deaths at that time could only distort the conclusions reached by the Delegation that was never allowed to conduct an independent investigation.

Despite these delays, WHO has issued positive statements on the treatment of the epidemic by the Chinese authorities, as well as instructions not to “stigmatize” China. In an address to the standing committee of the political bureau of the CCP on February 3, 2020, Xi Jinping declared: “I met with WHO Director-General Tedros, he told me that the speed and extent of the actions taken by China are exceptional, it is China’s institutional advantage, an experience that should be studied by other countries”<sup>28</sup>

Until the declaration of a pandemic by WHO on 11 March and beyond, the Director-General’s statements and recommendations generally favored Chinese positions. At the end of the official meeting between Xi Jinping and the Director-General on 28 January 2020, after the city of Wuhan and the province were placed under quarantine on 23 January, the Director-General declared that China was setting a “new standard” in health crisis management. Similarly, at the Munich Security Conference, Tedros again declared that “China has offered the world time.”

The WHO also decided not to declare a pandemic at the end of January, limiting the threat level to the PHEIC (*Public Health Emergency of International Concern*) level, despite experts’ concerns. The pandemic status will not be declared until March 11, more than three months after the first alerts in China. On several occasions, the WHO also denounced the closure of borders with China. The choice of the name of COVID 19 on 11 March had also been made, taking into account China’s fear of being stigmatized. According to Mr. Tedros’ statements, “We had to find a name that did not refer to a geographical location, an animal or a particular population group”<sup>29</sup> At the same time, Dr. Tedros also followed the PRC’s position on Taiwan, including a smear campaign claiming he received personal insults from the Taiwanese tweeter community.<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion

The management of the COVID 19 pandemic poses a collective challenge to the entire world. Beyond health issues, it also raises the question of how multilateralism works in the absence of a community of values between the main stakeholders. While China has today become the world’s second-largest economic power, and the leading trading power, at the heart of globalized supply chains, the nature of its political system poses specific threats to the world that are not taken into account.

Since the 1970s, China has developed close ties with the African continent playing on both characteristics as part of the “global South” developing countries as well as a financial juggernaut able to fund massive projects with

27 “Mission Summary, WHO Field Visit to Wuhan,” op.cit.

28 Xi Jinping, “为打赢疫情防控阻击战提供强大科技支撑” (Providing important technological and scientific support to win the battle for the prevention and control of the epidemic,” 02-03-2020, [http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2020-03/15/c\\_1125710612.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2020-03/15/c_1125710612.htm)

29 «World Health Authorities Now Have a Name for the Coronavirus Illness,» 11-02-2020 sur <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/11/world/asia/coronavirus-china.html#link-4dc10301>

30 These tweets were sent by trolls originating from mainland China as part of an info war campaign.

apparently “no string attached.” Filling a vacuum left by the former colonial powers and the Soviet Union after the end of the Cold War, the PRC strengthened its influence in a region where one of its main assets is its diplomatic weight at the UN. In that context, Ethiopia occupies a special place. The close and long-standing ties between the current ruling party and the PRC, and Ethiopia’s role in the African Union, make it a privileged strategic partner for Beijing.

The appointment of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus as Director-General of WHO in 2017 was a way for the PRC to preserve its disproportionate influence in this international institution. Mr. Tedros’ statements and positions show that Beijing’s strategy of influence did indeed serve its interests. However, the failure of the WHO to play its role and the considerable humanitarian and economic consequences for the whole world could lead to an awareness of the need to reconsider the foundations and how multilateral institutions operate, but also the commitment of democratic powers to countries most vulnerable to China’s strategies of influence.