

Comrades and Capitalists

The growing presence of China in the Namibian economy and its possible economic and political implications

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Background

China is a rapidly growing world power. The Republic of China (RoC) was a founding member of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945 and a permanent member of the UN Security Council from the beginning. However, Mao Zedong's Chinese communist party seized power in mainland China in 1949 and declared the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was only in 1971 that Resolution 2758 was passed by the UN General Assembly withdrawing recognition of the RoC and recognising the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China in the face of strong US opposition. The PRC tested its first atomic bomb in 1964 and first thermonuclear explosion in 1967 signing up to the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) with the only four other nuclear powers, the US, the Soviet Union, the UK and France a year later. China has never been a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) while Namibia joined soon after independence.

China's global economic impact, however, has only started to be felt since the great economic reforms and opening up to the outside world of the Deng era beginning in 1978. After close to zero growth rates since the communist takeover in 1949, the disastrous Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, the World Bank estimates that China's economy has grown by over 10% a year in the years since 1980 (World Bank, 2002). Since the fall of the Berlin wall, China has become the seventh largest economy in the world as well as the most populous. In purchasing power parity terms it is already the second largest. China's new found economic strength has also been felt in Namibia. The number of Chinese nationals in Namibia has grown since independence and now numbers between 2,000 and 3,000 according to the Chinese Embassy in Windhoek. This short paper tries to put together a picture of the current state of Chinese economic influence in Namibia. It is based purely on newspaper reports, internet research and publicly available documents. Certain issues were aided by discussions with the Chinese Ambassador to Namibia, Mr Liang Yinzhu, as well as selected individuals in Namibia.

History of Sino-Namibian relations

In order to understand the relationship of modern day Namibia and China, it is important to appreciate the historical background from which the present day relationship grew. Chinese involvement with Namibia goes back a long way to the beginnings of Namibia's

liberation struggle and a period of two important rivalries: that between Swapo and Swanu and that between China and the Soviet Union. Although most official statements from both Chinese and Namibian sides refer to the long-standing friendship and the shared fight against western colonialism, China's relationship to Namibia's ruling party was initially more complex.

Swanu claims the right to be recognised as Namibia's oldest political party having formed in May 1959. From the beginning, it involved itself not only in national but also in regional and continental politics. By the time Swapo formally launched itself with the publication of its first political programme in July 1960, Swanu had already joined the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) and already had ties with PRC, for whose leader, Mao Zedong, the Swanu leadership professed considerable admiration. According to Dobell (Dobell, 1998), the more pragmatic and cautious Swapo, which at that time lagged behind Swanu in international recognition, circulated a speech at the UN given by Swanu leader Kozonguizi on a visit to Peking (Beijing) in 1960 containing strong anti-imperialist statements, with particular reference to the US, with the intention of underlining US suspicions that Swanu was a subversive communist organisation.

In an article published in 1972, Swapo leaders Hage Geingob and Hidipo Hamutenya argued that it was Swapo's decision to launch the armed struggle taken in 1962 and effected in 1966 which demonstrated their party's superior commitment to the liberation of Namibia and distinguished it from Swanu in the eyes of many international supporters (Dobell, 1998). The Sino-Soviet split reached a climax in 1964 and resulted in a split of AAPSO. Swanu was claimed by the Chinese while Swapo, which was not yet an AAPSO member, was claimed by the Soviet camp. Swapo thus found itself accepted in the West and in the Soviet bloc, a situation Dobell says many believe gave rise to its external ascendancy. As Sino-Soviet rivalry intensified, Swanu found itself expelled from AAPSO at its 1967 Nicosia conference which the Chinese boycotted while Swapo was admitted.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that China consistently supported Namibia's claim for independence and was expressly thanked (along with many other countries and organisations) at Swapo's watershed Tanga Congress in Tanzania in 1969 for the moral and material support it had given the movement. By that stage Swapo had already been sending the brighter recruits to its camps to China for further training. More detailed information on Chinese support for the liberation struggle is hard to come by but Swapo president Sam Nujoma visited China seven times prior to Namibian independence. Mention is regularly made by top Swapo politicians of Chinese support to the party during the liberation struggle (see, for example, Kandy Nehova on http://www.grnnet.gov.na/News/Archive/2002/April/Week4/nam_china_rel_rpt.htm).

Government relations

Diplomatic ties were established between Namibia and China shortly after Namibian independence in March 1990. Although Namibia does not have an embassy in China, China was one of the first countries to establish one in Windhoek. Visits by senior Namibian politicians to China and by Chinese representatives to Namibia have taken

place on a regular basis. Founding President Nujoma visited China on five occasions in 1992, 1996, 1999, 2000 and 2004 (more than any non-African country) while other high-ranking Namibian government and party representatives have paid China many visits. Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Namibia in 1996 while Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan visited in 2000. A number of other high-ranking Chinese officials and business people have visited Namibia since independence.

Although Namibia flirted with some Taiwanese investors in the early 1990s, the Namibian government has been a strong supporter of the “One-China” policy which imposes the status of renegade province on Taiwan. Page 73 of government’s White Paper on Namibia’s Foreign Policy and Diplomacy Management published in 2004 states: “Further, in its relations with China, Namibia strictly adheres to the “One-China” policy.” (Republic of Namibia, 2004) This receives regular praise from the Chinese government which has over the years placed immense diplomatic effort on isolating Taiwan internationally. Some Swapo MPs have gone as far as to applaud China’s recent anti-secession law in Namibia’s parliament (see, for example, Margareth Mensah-Williams quoted in *The Namibian*, 18 March 2005) comparing China’s position on Taiwan with Namibia’s on Caprivi, a comparison which has not been lost on the Chinese. The Chinese Embassy in Windhoek has even written to *The Namibian* to correct it for referring to Taiwan as a country (*The Namibian*, 21 January 2005).

Trade

Trade between Namibia and China is documented by China Customs (www.China-Customs.com) which put total trade in goods (not services) at US\$74.6 million in 2003 up from N\$49.1 million in 2002. Figures for 2004 from the Chinese Embassy in Windhoek show trade rose again last year to US\$99.1 million. In 2003 China’s exports to Namibia consisted almost entirely of manufactured goods while Namibia’s exports to China included food and live animals, fish, and metal products, primarily non-ferrous metals. Namibian exports to China have increased in recent years as high rates of growth in China and a booming manufacturing sector have pushed up demand for raw materials. Last year, for example, all the output of Ongopolo copper mine was exported to China according to the company’s MD André Neethling. China has expressed its desire to purchase one third of Rössing’s uranium oxide production over the coming years. As far as is known, no pressure has yet been applied on the Namibian government, which has to agree all uranium sales as a member country of the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA), to refuse sales of uranium to Taiwan which Rössing supplies under long-term contracts. China has also expressed interest in buying Rössing shares but majority shareholder Rio Tinto sees no reason to sell at this stage. Since 2004, the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) was to have started negotiating a Free Trade Agreement with China but there does not seem to have been any follow-through on the idea of regular meetings between trade officials (*Business Day*, 8 February 2005). Namibia is a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) which China finally joined in 2001. Namibia is also a member of the Group of 77 and China, a lobbying group within the WTO.

Table 1: Trade between Namibia and China

| Year | Total (US\$m) | Exports to Namibia (US\$m) | Imports from Namibia (US\$m) |
|------|---------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| 2000 | 11.88 | 8.29 | 3.59 |
| 2001 | 32.48 | 22.12 | 11.26 |
| 2002 | 49.11 | 20.18 | 28.93 |
| 2003 | 74.58 | 37.63 | 36.95 |
| 2004 | 99.12 | 52.54 | 46.58 |

Source: www.china-customs.com

Investment

Despite repeated calls by former President Sam Nujoma and others to do so, China has not so far made any major investments in Namibia. Most Chinese investments seem to involve setting up small retail establishments to sell cheap consumer products imported from China. The exact number of such “Chinese” shops, which have sprung up all over Namibia, is unknown. The Chinese Embassy in Windhoek says there are 100 private Chinese enterprises in Namibia with a total investment of about US\$30 million in the areas of construction, manufacturing, food, health and real estate. They have given rise to a certain amount of concern among Namibians for the poor quality of the goods they sell and the low wages they pay their workers, issues which have even prompted letters to newspapers. Chinese entrepreneurs are known to have been active at the Export Processing Zone in Oshikango on the border with Angola.

China announced on January 10 2001 that it had successfully launched its second unmanned spacecraft, Shenzhou II, from the Jiuquan Satellite Launching Center, in north-west China. It was from the same centre that China launched its first satellite on April 24, 1970; its first long-distance rocket carrier, on May 18, 1980; and its first unmanned spacecraft Shenzhou I, on November 20, 1999. China launched its first manned spacecraft the Shenzhou V in 2003. In July 2001 the Chinese government completed the erection of a small tracking, telemetry and command station north of Swakopmund at a cost of about N\$12 million. The site was chosen because of the re-entry of the Chinese spaceship over west Namibia. China’s Xi’an Satellite Control Centre in Shaanxi operates the ground station which houses 20 staff during a mission phase while apparently five personnel stay there continuously to maintain equipment (see <http://www.globalsecurity.org/space/world/china/swakopmund.htm>).

A controversial investment was considered by the Municipality of Walvis Bay in November 2003 when a Chinese businessman Jacky Zheng of Microzone International tried to establish a shark-fin drying facility at Walvis Bay which, according to press reports, drew protest from all over the world (see *The Namibian*, 22 April 2004). The Municipality subsequently rejected the application.

Visits by Chinese business delegations have taken place in recent years to Keetmanshoop (see *New Era* 25-27 June 2004) and Walvis Bay (see *New Era* 24 March 2005) but have so far come to nothing. The seven-member delegation in June 2004 to Keetmanshoop

talked of setting up a textile factory. It is difficult to understand why Chinese companies would invest in a textile factory in Namibia given that Chinese producers now face no export quotas into the US market and enjoy much lower costs of production at home.

In October 2004 a Chinese company ZDE put in one of only two bids for Namibia's second cellular licence which was eventually postponed. ZDE is apparently an equipment supplier.

A Chinese businessman opened a retail outlet in Windhoek's northern industrial area in January 2005. The N\$5 million "Asia World" was reported to consist of 24 shops and factories making school uniforms and furniture (see *New Era* 10 January 2005).

Education and Culture

Friendly ties between the two governments have led to a steady trickle of educational and cultural developments. According to the Chinese Embassy, the Chinese government provides five full scholarships a year to Namibian students and sends Chinese professors and lecturers to teach in Namibia. According to an agreement reached between the two governments, the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) has been transmitting the English language programmes of Chinese Central TV Station (the Fourth and the Ninth Channel) three times a week. Each broadcast lasts an hour. For some time the NBC broadcast a Chinese cookery programme although ingredients often prove hard to find.

A visiting Chinese delegation in 1999 was present at the unveiling of a pavilion in Windhoek's zoo park donated by Shanghai Municipal People's government. Shanghai and Windhoek as well as Maqiao and Okahandja and Zhengzhou and Mariental have established sister city relations though there is little in the press to suggest these initiatives have amounted to much. The Chinese language edition of former President Nujoma's autobiography "Where Others Wavered" was published in Beijing in July 2004 while President Nujoma was on his twelfth visit to China.

Apart from the now ubiquitous Chinese shops, other private initiatives have taken place. Former Brave Warriors star Eliphaz "Safille" Shivute signed a lucrative three-year contract with Chinese First Division champions Dalian Wanda FC back in February 1999. There have been three Chinese restaurants in the capital for several years. A Chinese medicine clinic has been established in northern Windhoek.

Development assistance

China's aid programme to Namibia is small. According to figures taken from the Development Cooperation database at the National Planning Commission, total disbursements to Namibia by China amounted to N\$66 million between 1998 and 2003, placing China fifteenth in total disbursements, well below the EU, the US, individual European countries and Egypt. In terms of commitments, China comes in fifteenth in 2003 below Iceland, contributing less than 1% of total commitments in aid. Namibia receives no assistance from Taiwan.

In 1999 China extended an N\$8.6 million interest free loan to the National Housing Enterprise (NHE) which was used to construct 102 houses in Katima Mulilo. The houses were built by the China Beijing Corporation for International Economic Co-operation. At the handover ceremony, then ambassador Zhenqui said that to date the Chinese had built and handed over 663 low-cost, housing units covering a construction area of more than 30,000 square metres. Chinese medical teams have been working at Katutura State Hospital under a health cooperation agreement between the two governments.

Since then, however, Chinese aid seems to have become far more high profile and politically targeted. In 2002 China extended an interest free loan of N\$55 million to Namibia for the building of the new state house, the total cost of which has remained shrouded in secrecy and confusion. The Chinese were said to regard the building as an “important national project”. It turned out that a Chinese company then joined a North Korean firm in its construction. In June 2005 the new Minister of Works Joel Kaapanda announced that the Chinese would foot the entire bill for the new state house but declined to give figures (*The Namibian* 22 June 2005).

In June 2003 the Chinese Communist Party donated US\$30,000 to Swapo. Party General Secretary Ngarikutuke Tjiriange said the money would be used to print Swapo material for the extraordinary congress set for 2004 adding that foreign funding of political parties was not outlawed in Namibia (*The Namibian* 12 June 2003). This was followed up in November 2003 with an announcement by the Chinese Ambassador of a N\$25 million interest free loan with no conditions attached. A 20-year loan of N\$21.5 million was finally agreed by the Namibian government in March 2005. As far as can be seen, none of the loans from China have been reflected in national budget documents.

China has been involved in upgrading Namibia’s railways sending six experts to work with TransNamib in early 2004, “most of the cost” of which was to be born by China. TransNamib went on to take delivery of 4 diesel locomotives and 30 oil tankers built by China South Locomotive and Rolling Stock Industry Corporation at a total estimated cost of N\$36.6 million. These were fitted with UK produced diesel engines. The deal also involved assembling two locomotives in Namibia, something TransNamib said would help transfer skills. The delivery of a luxury train from China took place in February 2005. TransNamib has admitted that the new locomotives have suffered from some teething problems. Government subsequently announced that it would borrow N\$204 million from the Export-Import Bank of China to finance 16 locomotives for TransNamib (*The Namibian* 1 August 2005).

Namibia’s Parliamentary Register of Member’s Interests (Republic of Namibia, 2003) includes certain gifts to Namibian MPs from Chinese delegations including a DVD play to Minister of Fisheries Iyambo, a small Chinese frame to Willem Konjure from the speaker of the Chinese parliament, a lap-top computer to Mosé Tjitendero from the Chinese Embassy and a fridge to Hendrik Witbooi from a Chinese business.

A controversial characteristic of some of China's official support to Namibia has been the use of Chinese construction companies and workers in development projects such as the new Supreme Court, the Katutura Magistrate's Court and the National Council building in the capital. There were unconfirmed rumours that these companies used convicts as labourers, a claim dismissed by the Embassy. One can only conclude that this is a type of "tied aid" which helps provide jobs for Chinese nationals while at the same time contributes to China's aid programme. China is to assist in the construction of a part of the new State House and the construction of two regional council buildings in Rundu and Outapi.

Defence

During the liberation struggle, Swapo enjoyed the support of China and used Chinese military equipment. Since independence military procurement has been shrouded in secrecy. *The Windhoek Observer* of 5 July 2003 reported the arrival of 2,600 tonnes of military equipment at the port of Walvis Bay on board the *An Shun Jiang* including field guns, mortar bombs and trucks. Defence procurement in Namibia is generally shrouded in secrecy and not much more is known about the use of Chinese-built military equipment.

Crime

As the number of Chinese nationals in Namibia has grown, so has the number of criminal incidents that have involved Chinese citizens.

According to journalist and investigator John Grobler, the activities of Chinese criminal groups in Namibia are not well documented (Grobler, 2003). He cites the examples of two cases reported in the local media involving automatic assault rifles and other unlicensed firearms confiscated from various Chinese groups. He goes on to assert that Chinese traders have been active in diamond smuggling. In 2000 two Chinese nationals were executed outside Tsumeb in what was said to be a diamond deal gone wrong. According to Grobler, the police investigation quietly led nowhere. Trade in abalone, an edible mollusc, is carefully controlled by the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources. The abalone smuggling trade in South Africa is controlled by Chinese organised crime and it is suspected that such groups have a hand in abalone smuggling in Namibia too. China is known to be a large market for illegal ivory and other wildlife products but there is as yet no evidence that wildlife products from Namibia are finding their way to China.

A Chinese woman Mrs An was found guilty of trying to pass off US\$20,000 worth of counterfeit notes with Commercial Bank of Namibia in October 2000 (*The Observer* 18 December 2004).

In 2001 wheelchair bound Yu Zin was told by the Namibian authorities he had 21 days to leave the country (*The Namibian* 13 August 2004). Three years later he was still in Namibia facing multiple charges including drug dealing and armed robbery, as well as a violent incident at a local Chinese restaurant. Police had found 200 grammes of heroin in

his car and at his sister's house in Windhoek West. The case was finally abandoned after the complainant told the court he was no longer interested in continuing with the case and the defendants were acquitted. "Justice damaged me with postponements very much more than any robber with their deed," the complainant was quoted as saying afterwards. Yu Zin is reported to be married to a Namibian. Lawyers for Yu complained that getting translators was proving difficult. "Everyone is afraid to assist in this case because of threats that are going around," he was quoted as saying in *The Namibian*.

In May 2004 a Chinese businessman Hanfang Liang was shot by two robbers at the Tal Valley Service Station who tried to rob him of N\$554,000 in cash but it does not appear that this involved Chinese criminals (*The Namibian* 7 May 2004).

A report in *New Era* on 28 August 2004 highlighted the growing concerns of the Chinese community in Namibia about the Chinese mafia quoting one person who claimed in that year alone over 50 Chinese nationals had been brutalised but that this had led to no action by the Namibian law enforcement agencies. Some members of the Chinese community have gone so far as to write a letter to government and claim that bribes are paid whenever they are arrested.

Police inspected five Chinese shops in Walvis Bay in June 2005 and confiscated over 600 pirated DVDs following a tip-off from the Namibian Society of Composers and Authors of Music (Nascam). No arrests were made. Spelling mistakes were apparently one way in which the pirated material was recognised (*The Namibian* 28 June 2005).

Conclusions

China is a rapidly growing world economic power searching for new sources of supplies and markets for its industries. An economy of more than a billion people growing at 10% a year is historically unprecedented and is bound to shake up the established economic world order. Namibia is a small economy trying to take advantage of globalisation by fostering trade and attracting investment to create jobs and growth. Namibia's political leadership also sees advantages in diversifying its economic dealings away from an almost exclusive focus on the rich West to a more balanced relationship which includes other developing countries.

Despite the obvious and striking differences between the two countries, there are also some important similarities. Not only do their political leaderships share the view that both countries have thrown off the shackles of Western imperialism in one form or another through armed struggle, but both countries have pragmatic political leaderships which, despite strong socialist and authoritarian backgrounds, accept and use modern global capitalism to uplift their peoples economically. Perhaps because this has in many ways been a painful and involuntary process, neither country is trying to export its "values" or ways of doing things to the other. It suits both to adhere to a policy of strict non-interference in each other's affairs. This paper has found no evidence that China is seeking to influence Namibian policy on anything other than Taiwan. Namibia supports the "One-China" policy partly as thanks for past support, partly because it receives

Chinese aid in exchange, and partly simply because it pays Namibia to be on good terms with an economic superpower. Despite the rhetoric, however, companies in Namibia continue to trade extensively with Taiwan, as does the PRC itself.

The real puzzle is, given that relations are so warm, why there is not a greater exchange of ideas more generally and, perhaps, especially on economic policy. The paradox here is that China adheres to very few of the rules of orthodox market economics – clear and secure private property rights, the rule of law, democratic and accountable government, free and open markets – yet is growing ten times faster and creating millions of jobs more than Namibia, which by and large adheres to all these internationally accepted economic norms. China is hardly evangelical, appearing to possess little inclination to sell its “economic model”, which still rests to a large extent on cheap labour, to anyone. The reason for this is probably because, at bottom, the Chinese model is little more than a transitional stage between a Maoist economy and a modern capitalist one. Though impossible to recognise this in public, no one in China doubts that the ultimate aim is to create a modern capitalist economy. What remains uncertain is how this is to find accommodation with an illiberal one-party political system. But the contrast between Chinese economic performance and Namibia with its social-democratic policies which discourage the use of labour and poor record of employment growth is stark.

Internationally there is plenty of evidence that Chinese companies often behave differently to Western ones, unconstrained as they mostly are to the pressures of public, consumer and shareholder opinion. Western companies regularly complain of China’s “ethical advantage” in the world market place, allowing Chinese companies to do business with unsavoury regimes and cut corners to avoid costs. Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, which measures the perceptions of corruption by experts, ranked China 71 compared to Namibia’s 54 in 2004. In its 2002 Bribe Payer’s Index China ranked 20th out of 21 positions just above Russia indicating that Chinese companies have a high propensity for foreign bribe paying to win or retain business. In a country of young and weak institutions such as Namibia this could create problems.

The bottom line seems to be that, Taiwan aside, China just wants to do business. There is no reason why Namibia should not try to take advantage of this. Yet it is hard to see business with China growing to a stage where more than minerals and perhaps agricultural products are involved. Small traders are one thing, but it is difficult to understand why Chinese companies might want to invest in Namibia to create jobs here given costs are far lower at home. China is still only at the beginning of its massive economic transformation to reduce poverty and inequality. Whether buying up raw materials from Namibia constitutes a new form of colonialism can be left to individuals and political scientists to judge. As Chinese business becomes progressively more like Western business, they will increasingly be after the same thing: profit.

Annexe

Key statistics on Namibia and China (2003 unless otherwise stated)

| | <i>Namibia</i> | <i>China</i> |
|--|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Population (ranking in 2004) | 2,033,000 (141) | 1,296,500,000 (1) |
| Surface area (sq km) | 824,290km ² | 9,598,050km ² |
| GDP in US\$m (ranking in 2004) | US\$5,456m (117) | US\$1,649,329m (7) |
| GDP PPP in US\$m (ranking in 2004) | US\$13,139m (117) | US\$7,123,712m (2) |
| GNI PPP per capita in US\$ (ranking in 2004) | US\$6,960 (97) | US\$5,530 (116) |
| GDP growth (annual %) | 3.7% | 9.3% |
| FDI, net inflows (BoP, current US\$m) | n/a | US\$53,505m |
| Aid per capita (current US\$) | US\$72.52 | US\$1.03 |
| Exports of goods and services (% of GDP) | 39% | 34% |
| Imports of goods and services (% of GDP) | 47% | 32% |
| Gross capital formation (% of GDP) | 23% | 44% |
| Life expectancy at birth, total (years) | 40 years | 71 years |
| Literacy rate, adult male | 84% | 95% |
| Literacy rate, adult female | 83% | 87% |
| School enrolment, primary (% net) | 78% | 95% |
| School enrolment, secondary (% net) | 44% | n/a |
| Internet users (per 1,000 people) | 34 | 63 |
| Currency | Namibia dollar | Yuan Renminbi |
| Currency code | NAD | RMB |
| President | Hifikepunye Pohamba | Hu Jintao |

Source: World Bank Development Indicators database

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