CCS Commentaries

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Kidnapping of Chinese in Africa – What can and what should Beijing do?

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The year 2012 began with more news on kidnapping of Chinese workers in African states, the latest and highest numbers being in Sudan and in Egypt. As our Weekly Briefing reported, Chinese road workers were kidnapped by rebels in Southern Kordofan, an oil-rich, rebellion-racked state of Sudan. China's Vice Foreign Minister, Xie Hangsheng, expressed that he was "deeply shocked" by the abductions and China sent a Foreign Ministry-led working group to Sudan to assist the rescue of the 29 workers. Another group of 25 Chinese taken hostage in Egypt was freed the same week. The hostage-taking was not directed against Chinese actions. Rather, conflict groups used international hostages that they could easily get hold of. It is more than likely that we will see more incidences of kidnapping or other dangerous situations for Chinese in the nearer future. What does this mean for Chinese investments and Chinese policies?

Linked to the incidences described above, the Chinese Foreign Ministry warned Chinese nationals and overseas companies to be more wary of safety risks, strengthen preventative measures and contact China's diplomatic missions in emergency situations, reported China Daily. In fact, in the Chinese publications monitoring China-Africa relations, we have seen a number of more cautious statements after the civil war in Libya led to the evacuation of around 34,000 Chinese, which was, in the first place, a scary experience for those directly affected. It also, however, was a costly exercise with presumably included great losses of investments, too. In other words: There are two dimensions in this increasing number of incidences: the individual and the political.

The individual and the political dimension of security

First, the notably increasing presence of Chinese in Africa, increases the exposure to criminal or terrorist activities in Africa. In very crude terms: more people simply increase the likeliness of something to happen to them. Chinese workers often live in special compounds, so abductions are likely to concern groups of Chinese nationals, unless Chinese companies live up to their responsibility for the security of their staff and have security measures stepped up. A tightening security, however, will further distance Chinese from their host environments – and is likely to have negative repercussions on the image of Chinese in African states. Company security measure, additionally, will not cover the thousands of Chinese individual traders that have started businesses in African states. This aspect is much about the personal dimension – which is not unlike that of other foreign nationals in Africa; some risks have to be taken when engaging in foreign countries and individuals will have to take their own precautions. This is something to be concerned about – and can

presumably only be addressed by an ever more active role of the embassies on the ground, informing Chinese citizens about risks in the respective countries. The role of Chinese diplomacy is thus undergoing changes.

Secondly, Chinese investment is often taking more risks than other foreign investments, not least so because it is in higher risk environments that Chinese entrepreneurs can play their advantages as coming from a developing country. Constructions in remote and at times risky areas are a key shaper for the Chinese image in African states.

Investment in risky countries is actually encouraged by Chinese banking and other institutions – precisely for the reason of establishing Chinese businesses in a fiercely contested world market and to explore new economic frontiers. A number of countries in which Chinese businesses operate are unstable. Instability does mean that the government does not exercise full control of the territory (no monopoly of power, as the social consensus on this is lacking). Consequently, security in some cases is 'privatised' through security companies, instead of fostering the state monopoly on power. In other instances, the government tries to keep tight control of the population, which can result in an eroding social consensus,. This erosion of state legitimacy can lead to violent reactions in the long run if complaints are not addressed and disenchanted groups continue to be marginalised.

New challenges for Chinese policy

More investments and more citizens in Africa will mean that China will increasingly have to deal with insecure situations, despite its declared wish to stay out of domestic conflicts. Indeed, one might argue, the orthodox understanding of 'non-interference' becomes more and more outdated. China will have to engage with African societies. Engagement will have to happen not because China wants to impose an agenda, but rather because it is in the Chinese interest. When conflict breaks out in Sudan or Libya or, say, possibly – in the future – unrest against unpopular regimes elsewhere, Chinese interests are affected.

Preventive and engaging diplomacy is needed, as the means of engagement for China will certainly be non-military - if we exclude participation in UN missions from the picture (China is already very active in these). In some instances, Chinese will have to act as mediators between conflict parties. This can be international crisis like (since recently) in the case of Sudan and South Sudan. Judging from past situations, however, it is more likely in Africa that crisis emerges from internal strife in a country. This challenge means that more substantive research on and engagement with the 'inner-working' of African states and social fault-lines is needed. A proper risk analysis for bigger investments will also have to systematically include the internal political dimension.

With regard to political activities, it might actually become a point of contact with the Western discussion on 'governance' – with a Chinese understanding of the term, of course. Political solutions for conflicts require that they can be addressed within the system, preventing them from turning violent. Beyond the 'hard infrastructure' that is surely needed for development, the 'soft infrastructure' in the shape of a capable administration is also needed for development, including the balancing of conflicting social demands.