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Job change in Beijing – Zhong Jianhua is China's new “Mr. Africa”

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A change of staff has taken place in China's diplomacy towards Africa. Beijing's new special representative for African affairs is Zhong Jianhua, former ambassador to South Africa. Even if only five years his predecessor's junior, his style is likely to differ. While Liu Guijin came to the task as a trouble-shooter, Zhong's task seems to be a normalisation of further China-Africa relations. Trouble might await him, nevertheless, as one would expect for this position. Chinese diplomacy has become much more deeply engaged in Africa and also more routine than they would probably have predicted themselves only ten years ago.

Liu Guijin, China's first special envoy for Africa, was called into this trouble-shooter position in May 2007. His very nomination illustrated tensions between China's orthodox non-interference policy and the expanding expectations towards a global power in the making. In Sudan, China's ally Omar al-Bashir was not willing to stop the conflict in Darfur – and not only in the eyes of non-governmental organisations, China increasingly became accomplice to the crime by continuing economic engagement with what they labelled as a 'rogue regime'. The approaching Olympics in Beijing in 2008 created a sense of urgency in Beijing as negative news coverage threatened to overshadow the millennium event in Beijing. Even if (in Chinese understanding) business was business and sports were sports, and bloody politics in Sudan's Darfur were something different altogether, Darfur was a crystallisation point for an overly-cautious Chinese approach towards African conflicts. The official hands-off approach to anything and everything that happened in Africa was understood as cynical in the West. Contrary to the very rationale of China's non-interference doctrine, China was increasingly perceived as party to the conflict in Darfur. The orthodoxy in non-interference diplomatically backfired and Chinese pragmatism was called for in search of a solution. The solution was a diplomat gifted with dexterity and experience on the African continent.

Liu Guijin, born in 1945 in China's eastern Shandong province, is an apt diplomat who had to balance conflicting Chinese priorities. His comments were not always to the gusto of the media. Yet, he is one of the few Chinese old-hands in Africa with previous postings in Kenya and Ethiopia and looking back on heading the embassies in Harare, Zimbabwe, and Pretoria, South Africa. Before becoming “Mr Africa” to the outside world, Liu had already been the head of the African affairs department in China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Liu apparently managed to twist some arms in Khartoum with regard to Darfur. Yet, he admittedly was not the miracle end to all troubles for Chinese diplomacy in Africa, as more recent abductions of Chinese workers in Sudan and Egypt illustrate. But then, it is already a Herculean task to be “China's voice on Africa” in the best of situations situation: the situations are often so complex, with an increasingly broad set of Chinese actors and with the Foreign Ministry not being the strongest actor in China's Africa policy in the first place.

The new “Mr Africa” is only five years' Mr Liu's junior. His career, however, was quite



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different to date, more so than the common feature of a last posting in South Africa might seem to suggest. In his career, Zhong Jianhua has had more exposure to Western settings than experiences in Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, he has participated in setting up the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” between China and South Africa and was on post while South Africa’s President Zuma became increasingly interested in exploring the China-linkages. Zhong is as soft speaking and charming as Liu Guijin. And Zhong also shows a sharp intellectual interest in African development and its internal challenges, coupled with a down-to-earth perspective on China’s Africa expertise.

A number of yet unknown challenges will be on Mr Zhong’s plate in his new position. A few, however, can already be imminent. First, one of the tasks will be continuing mediation between South Sudan and Sudan – also for the sake of continuous flows of Sudanese oil and Chinese investments. Further, the upcoming fifth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) casts its shadow ahead. To some degree, the erstwhile honeymoon between China and Africa is turning into ‘ordinary life’, with an increasing number of disappointed expectations on both sides. The sustainability of the relationship will have to be better taken care of, while new businesses aspire to enter and develop African markets. The ‘blessings’ of Chinese business activities might not always be to the liking of those ‘blessed’ with them. In the least of cases, as China well knows herself, new opportunities come with new risks, e.g. those of increasing inequalities between the haves and have-nots in partner countries. While this is, indeed, an internal affair of African states, it does have repercussions on Chinese investments and possibly also on Chinese citizens living in these societies in increasing numbers (see the abduction problem, but also xenophobia). More proactive engagement is thus needed.

Zhong Jianhua’s postings in London and as consul general in Los Angeles, will certainly have sharpened his senses for engagement with a critical (if not, at times, openly hostile) public opinion. He might thus be expected, probably more so than his predecessor Liu, to be open to the necessity and pitfalls of an engagement with the wider public. This awareness and personal quality in public diplomacy is certainly a needed one in the China-Africa relations in 2012. For the better of Africa – and China: Good luck, Mr Ambassador! 