

CHINA'S DILEMMA: REFLECTIONS FROM AFRICA AND XINJIANG

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For decades, China's been an assimilating power in Xinjiang (Uyghur Autonomous Region). On the other hand, it's been showing a more positive face on the African continent with its soft power instruments. While we witness China's economic expansion in the 21st century, its moral standing is explicitly perplexing. Frankly, China's image in Xinjiang is far from its image in Africa.

Although China's engagement in Africa has become more alerting for African nations due to its debt trap narrative, the country has become a giant investor on the continent in the last two decades. As documented by Western media, China-Africa bilateral trade relations have recently surpassed 200 billion dollars. Notably, Chinese cash flow of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into African countries finally made China a top investor there. As Chinese media network expands in Africa, negative statements towards

China have now become a taboo for African leaders. Chinese state institutions work to build a positive image in Africa where Chinese companies invest in mining and petroleum sector ranging from oil, natural gas, gold, diamond, to copper just to name a few. It is not a secret that today China is the biggest buyer of Angolan, Sudanese, Nigerian oil and Zambian copper.

From its measures in limiting Taiwan's diplomatic opening to Africa, it is safe to say that China's ambitions in Africa go beyond economic expectations. China does not hesitate from pressuring African leaders not to recognize Taiwan. In this regard, the recent agreement between Taiwan and Somaliland containing cooperation in various sectors such as agriculture, energy, fisheries, mining, public health, education and ICT has sparked outcry in China.¹

China's economic expansion in Africa goes parallel with its increasing cultural presence. Chinese cultural centers and Confucius Institutes for example are now all over the continent. The African youth can learn the Mandarin language and become familiar with Chinese cultural events and films. Moreover, China aims to include Mandarin in African schools even though there has been opposition to this idea. However, the Confucius Institute opened up 54 centers across the continent.ⁱⁱ It would not matter, of course, if China had showed its respect to other cultural forms as much as it expected respect for its own culture. Now we all know that China's policy in Xinjiang aims to erase the entire culture of the Uyghurs. So, on a moral basis there is a big dilemma for China in seeking a clear path to become the world's leading super power.

At home, we obviously see another face of China's pathological state policies. Nowadays it became clear that China is applying its assimilation program in Xinjiang against the Uyghur people. The ruthless face of China appears in the detention camps, which are presented under the banner of "re-education" camps. The Uyghurs keep asking the Chinese state about the whereabouts of their kins and relatives. Religious restrictions and ethno-cultural cleansing of minority groups cannot be hidden under cheap antiterrorism propaganda. The Uyghur people reveal the real face of China to the world through social media contents.

China is dreaming to create "One China" in which all different ethnic and religious minorities are assimilated - willingly or unwillingly - by state policies. On the contrary, this trial is triggering the revival of ethnic and religious identities as past experiences of humanity have demonstrated. Multiculturalist Bhikhu Parekh ironically indicates that culture is a powerful element for human beings and a real cultural assimilation might actually mean a biological assimilation since a tiny part of a culture might be enough for its rebirth.ⁱⁱⁱ

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has recently accused China for its serious human rights violations. Approximately 1 million Uyghurs have been detained in camps by China. China's human rights violations continue with the Chinese government forcibly sterilizing Uyghur women and imposing forced labor despite international condemnations.^{iv} China's stubborn act once again demonstrates China's dilemma in front of the global audience in terms of basic values of humanity. This black scene actually shows that China's policies are quite close to colonialism. Therefore, China is rising, but it is rising as a new colonial power of the 21st century.

While some countries prefer to remain silent or neutral against China's crime in Xinjiang, countries such as the US, Dutch and Canadian parliaments have recognized China's ruthless policy towards the Uyghurs as genocide and crimes against humanity. The US officials have remarked terms such as "forced assimilation" and "cleansing of an ethno-religious minority group".^v However, the West's timely approach towards the Uyghurs just shows another branch of hypocrisy since previously they stayed silent for China's crimes due to their strategic interests. The rise of China forced the West to look at the world with fresh eyes. For that, the Western powers must be willing to re-design their bilateral relations with Africa in a new context rather than viewing the continent as the "white man's burden".

Finally, African countries have more alternatives nowadays in designing their relations with foreign countries. Along with long-established partners, African leaders would like to work with China in favor of getting low-interest loans. However, Africa should still be aware of China's human rights violations. China's brutal policy towards the Uyghurs is reflecting well the hard face of China.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Abhishek Mishra, “Taiwan’s Africa outreach irks China”, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), 29 August 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/taiwans-africa-outreach-irks-china/>
- ⁱⁱ Bob Wekesa, “What Do the US and China Want From Africa?”, The Diplomat, 1 March 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/what-do-the-us-and-china-want-from-africa/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bhikhu Parekh, Çokkültürlülüğü Yeniden Düşünmek (B. Tanrıseven, Çev.). Ankara: Phoenix, 2002
- ^{iv} “China doubles down on Uyghur Muslims with harsh prosecutions: HRW”, Daily Sabah, 24 February 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/china-doubles-down-on-uyghur-muslims-with-harsh-prosecutions-hrw>
- ^v Edward Wong & Chris Buckley, “U.S. Says China’s Repression of Uighurs Is ‘Genocide’”, The New York Times, 19 January 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/us/politics/trump-china-xinjiang.html>