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Book Review

Copson, Raymond W. 2007. *The United States in Africa: Bush Policy and Beyond*. London: Zed Books. Series African Arguments. 168 pp. ISBN: 978-1-84277-914-9 (hb), 978-1-84277-915-6 (pb). Price: £36.99 (hb), £12.99 (pb).

Alden, Chris. 2007. *China in Africa*. London: Zed Books. Series African Arguments. xi + 157 pp. ISBN: 978-1-84277-863-0 (hb), 978-1-84277-864-7 (pb). Price: £45.00 (hb), £12.99 (pb).

by Bjørn Møller (17 April 2008)

Both books belong to a new series, edited by Alex de Waal and Richard Dowden, called Africa Arguments. Intended as short (around 150 pages) accounts of topical issues, they are written in a journalistic style by eminent specialists in their respective fields. Previous volumes have included an excellent account of the Darfur crisis and a very good one of Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army. The books by Copson and by Alden supplement each other well, and are devoted to two of Africa's main external actors.

Copson's book covers the United States' African policies or, indeed, the occasional absence of policies. The Cold War ensured a certain interest in African affairs in Washington, mainly to prevent the U.S.S.R. from gaining a foothold on the continent and to support white minority regimes in Salisbury and Pretoria, Portuguese colonialists, and utterly corrupt African rulers such as Mobutu in Zaire. Following the Cold War, however, U.S. presidents and Congress have taken, at most, a sporadic and short-term interest in Africa. On some occasions, media coverage such as that of the Somali civil war-cum-famine in the early 1990s made presidents feel that they needed to do something, manifested for instance in the U.N.-mandated intervention in Somalia, the result of which Copson assesses more favorably than most others do. In other cases, administrations have avoided doing (almost) anything at all, as in the case of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. According to the author, lack of high-level attention and the absence of assigning Africa strategic importance also has its advantages: it allows even small pressure groups to affect policymaking. Although the results are rarely substantial in terms of budget appropriations, even small grants and programs may be substantial when seen from the point of view of the beneficiaries.

Two factors point in the direction of greater attention being paid to (parts of) Africa in the future. First is the growing U.S. interest in African oil, not least because of uncertainty about the reliability of oil supplies from an increasingly anti-American and volatile Middle East. This interest, unfortunately, has made Washington turn a blind eye to some of the worst and most corrupt regimes on the continent (e.g., in Equatorial Guinea) and their blatant violations of human rights and other international standards. Second, the "global war on terror" also entails a growing engagement in Africa, especially in the subregions believed to be most susceptible to Islamism and Jihadism, West Africa and the Horn of Africa. The author largely agrees, probably erroneously, with the U.S. administration that terror is a serious problem, but he rightly argues that the policies actually pursued have tended to be counterproductive, e.g., when the CIA started

funding warlords in Mogadishu and thereby provoked the formation of the Union of Islamic Courts which then established itself as a *de facto* state, only to be defeated by an Ethiopian intervention condoned by Washington.

While not uncritical, the book is quite balanced in its assessments and provides a useful and up-to-date introduction to U.S. policy in Africa.

Equally balanced is **Alden**'s about China's increasingly important role in Africa, in part as a competitor of the United States. Following the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and the coming to power of Deng Xiapeng and his successors, China has become very pragmatic and even opportunistic in its dealings with Africa. The leaders in Beijing are mainly interested in what Africa has to offer to China economically, i.e., markets for cheap manufactured goods and a source of natural resources, especially oil. As a nondemocracy, Chinese leaders are (even) less concerned than their counterparts in Washington about the human rights and democratic credentials of their collaborators, especially those which, like Sudan and Angola, are oil-producers. Hence, for instance, the reluctance of Beijing to support, or even accept, U.N. resolutions against Sudan for its war in Darfur. But the author also records China's increasingly constructive attitude to such issues. Beijing is not fundamentally opposed to all goals pursued by the West. It disapproves of the means favored by the West, and remains committed to norms of sovereignty and nonintervention in countries' internal affairs, which rules out "megaphone diplomacy" and coercive use of military power. China prefers discrete diplomatic pressure, such as that it already appears to have exerted on Khartoum. Neither are China's leaders enthusiastic about sacrificing economic interests on the altar of human rights promotion (nor is, on closer inspection, most of the West most of the time).

From Africa's point of view, China definitely has something to offer. For example, incumbent rulers surely appreciate the Chinese attitude regarding infringements on sovereignty. As regards the general population, the picture is mixed. While people tend to resent the massive presence of Chinese workers in Chinese construction projects, they do appreciate the results, e.g., in the infrastructure sector. Some Africans are pushed out of the market by cheap Chinese commodities flooding the markets, with a rapidly expanding Chinese-owned and manned retail sector as a companion, but as consumers they enjoy sudden access to affordable radios and other luxuries that would otherwise remain out of reach.

Following a balanced account, the author concludes that whereas all contain grains of truth, none of his three hypothetical characterizations of China as a partner in development, as a competitor, and as a neocolonizer fully captures the complexity of China-Africa relations.

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