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The dragon in the archipelago

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Jorge Heine, Contributor

The current Olympics has been China's 'coming out party', as well as the launch, as it were, of what some observers say will be the 'Asian century'. Much attention will be paid to the final gold medals count, and how Chinese athletes stack up against their US counterparts - yet another contest between what Susan Shirk has called the "fragile superpower" and the established one. Still, China's rise is far broader. Across the global South, China is making its mark, changing political and economic realities in a way that would have been unthinkable 15 years ago.

George Soros has referred to the growing Chinese and Indian presence in Africa as "the new colonialists". Others have voiced concern about the impact of Chinese trade in Latin America, seen by some as fostering de-industrialisation. Both directly (through the competition of its own, dirt-cheap goods) and indirectly (through its gluttonous appetite for raw material and commodities) China would be condemning Latin America to backwardness, a region stuck into exporting food and minerals, without the benefits of industrialisation - or so the reasoning goes.

Five-year boom

Yet, the issue is far more complex, and many attribute the current, five-year boom in Latin America to the rise in commodity prices triggered by increased Chinese (and Indian) demand, a boom that has made it possible for many governments in the region to pay their debts, clean up their acts and enact some badly needed public policy reforms.

One must also distinguish between the impact of Chinese economic growth on South America (whose natural resources have allowed it to benefit from it) and the one on Central America and Mexico (whose different productive structure has meant a more direct challenge from Chinese competition). What about the Caribbean? How is it affected by the rise of China?

Over the past decade the Chinese presence in the Caribbean has become extensive -

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with such milestones as its CDB membership since 1998, the establishment of diplomatic relations with Dominica and Grenada, and its participation in the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti - let alone the swift increase in trade and investment links with Cuba and the region in general (trade increased at an average of 32 per cent a year from 2001 to 2006, to US\$ 4.4 billion).

This interest is mutual: Cuba's long-standing diplomatic mission in Beijing has now been joined by The Bahamas, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, and Suriname with permanent embassies in 'the Middle Kingdom'. Improbably, the Chinese have now arguably a greater diplomatic presence in the Eastern Caribbean than the United States, with permanent missions in all countries with which they have diplomatic relations - as opposed to Uncle Sam, who in its cost-cutting exercises has consolidated all of them into its embassy in Bridgetown.

What triggers this Chinese interest in a region known neither for abundant natural resources nor huge markets?

Diplomatic competition

As my CIGI colleague Gregory Chin has argued in a fine, as yet unpublished paper ('China and Small States of the Caribbean: Responding to Vulnerabilities, Securing Development Space' (mimeo, February 2008), a combination of factors is at work here - from the existence of some mineral resources in the larger islands (nickel in Cuba, bauxite in Jamaica, oil and gas in Trinidad) to diplomatic competition with Taiwan in the Eastern Caribbean, among others.

Should Caribbean people be concerned about being 'swamped' with Chinese goods as a result of this? Not necessarily. It could be argued that, globalisation being what it is, cheap Chinese goods would reach the Caribbean shores anyway, that local consumers benefit from them, and that local industry should gear up to face international competition in any event. And if tourism remains a key source of jobs and foreign exchange in the Caribbean, and the potential of Chinese tourism is only starting to be tapped, one can only guess as to what a regular inflow of Chinese visitors to the region would mean - something in which The Bahamas has been in the lead at laying the ground for.

'Charm offensive'

However that may be, the Chinese 'charm offensive' has to be set in the wider context of global realignments. During a recent visit of mine to San Jose, Costa Rica, it was announced that Poland was closing its embassy there and that the French-Costa Rican Lycee would also close its doors, due to French budget cuts. The same day, a public opinion poll revealed that 25 per cent of Costa Ricans viewed China as the country's best friend (only the U.S. ranked higher, with 29 per cent) - and a mere three per cent thought so of the European Union.

What we are witnessing is a global shift. This is not just about China wanting more raw materials or being keen to displace Taiwan from a few remaining capitals. This is about a new, major player on the global scene. At a time when Europe is increasingly self-absorbed after the failure of the EU Constitution project first and the Lisbon Treaty later, and the United States is uncertainly grappling with what Fareed Zakaria

has called "the post-American world", the Global South and the Caribbean can only welcome the opening of new options and alternatives this entails. Yet, it would seem this is not always apparent.

Whereas in Toronto the most coveted and highly paid babysitters and *au pairs* are Chinese (on the logic that they will help the children pick up their mother tongue), I am told it has not been easy for the newly established Chinese language programme at UWI, Mona, to find students.

My grandfather, quoting Bismarck, used to muse about "die gelbe Gefahr" (the "yellow peril"). In fact, at the opening of this new century, the real peril is faced by those who ignore or misconstrue the enormous opportunities offered to the developing world by the rise of China.

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