



THE FORUM ON CHINA-AFRICA COOPERATION (FOCAC): A FRAMEWORK FOR CHINA'S RE-ENGAGEMENT WITH AFRICA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an examination of FOCAC as a framework for Sino-African engagement in the 21st Century. China's growing and expanding engagement with Africa has assumed a prominent feature of International Relations and discourses. The engagement is multifaceted, encapsulating mainly trade and related economic ties. Given China's fast economic and industrial growth, thirst and huge demand for new sources of energy and other resources has been generated, bringing China closer to Africa where the availability of these resources abound. This situates China's renewed interest in Africa since the 21st Century. The deepening of economic involvement in Africa is realized through a mix of aid, special concessions, debt relief, scholarships, the provision of educational and medical training personnel and infrastructural investment projects. This represents a stark departure from the past under Mao Zedong, when the relationship was guided by the ideological conflict of the Cold War and especially Beijing's attempts to dislodge Moscow's influence in the Third World. Now economic pragmatism and symbolic diplomacy appear to navigate Sino-African relations. The lynchpin of China's re-engagement of African in this century is the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), initiated at the Ministerial Conference in Beijing in 2000. The article explores the FOCAC framework, assesses the reality of its promises, and addresses the question of its problems and challenges. The findings are that China's increased presence in Africa under the FOCAC framework has been faced with criticisms and confrontations, but the forum has equally strengthened bilateral economic relationship between China and Africa, and has provided platform for Beijing to become a serious humanitarian benefactor to Africa.

Keywords: Sino-African Relation, China's Re-engagement of Africa, Economic Development, China-Africa Cooperation Forum, Trade, Aid

INTRODUCTION

China's growing and expanding engagement with Africa has assumed a prominent feature of International Relations and discourses. The engagement is multifaceted, encapsulating mainly trade and related economic ties. The search for natural resources explains the tremendous increase in Chinese trade and investment in Africa. China's growing economy, especially the industrial sector, and expansion in the global economy, demand enormous supplies of mineral

and energy resources, which are abundant in Africa. China has emerged as a prosperous nation and has grown by an average of 9% per annum over the last 25 years, the fastest growing rate for any major economy in recorded history. Recent reports suggest that China's growth rate will reach as high as 13% per annum (Rotberg 2008). Industrial output has also increased by almost 50%, creating industrial overproduction in sectors like electronics, textiles and footwear. This rapid expansion has created the need for both import markets for energy and raw materials, and export markets for Chinese manufactures. Of all natural resources that capture China's interest in Africa: oil, copper, iron ore, bauxite, uranium, aluminum, manganese, diamonds, etc, the most important is oil (Broadman, 2007). Oil makes up 62% of the total African exports to China, with Angola supplying 47% of the total, followed by Sudan supplying 25%, the DRC 13%, Equatorial Guinea 9% and Nigeria 3% (Broadman, 2007). China's trade with Africa has increased tremendously within a short period. Trade has risen from \$2bn in 1999 to \$11bn in 2000, \$12bn in 2002, \$18bn in 2003, \$30bn in 2004, \$40bn in 2005, to \$50bn in 2006, and extending to \$100 billion in 2008 (Alden, 2005, Peiliang 2005, Taylor, 2006, Hellstrom 2009). China displaced European, American and Japanese diplomatic and capitalist soft power in many sub-Saharan African countries, winning influence in countries where Western governments were conspicuous by their absence.

China's diplomatic offensive has been as thorough as its investments, trade, and aid advances. China has become the largest new investor, trader, buyer and aid donor in a select number of important African countries, and a major new economic force in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. China rivals United States for Angola's oil, controls most of the Sudan's oil, and is exploring energetically for oil onshore, and up and down the coasts offshore (Rotberg 2008). It is the major purchaser of timber from West Africa. About 40% of Africa's total export to Asia are to China, and about 30% of Asia's total exports to Africa are from China (). China imports timber from Gabon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon and Liberia; cotton from Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Cote d'Ivoire, and Cameroon; copper from Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo; ferrochrome and platinum from Zimbabwe; diamonds from South Africa; tin and tantalum from the Democratic Republic of Congo. To the above named countries, China supplies electronic goods, machinery, motorcycle, clothing, footwear, and a host of additional low-value consumer items. China's share of Africa's total trade is rising and will soon eclipse America and European annual totals.

The growing China –Africa ties is also visible in the number of high profile visits. The visit by the Chinese foreign Minister to Africa has become an annual event. It is on record that between 1963 and 2004, 93 Chinese leaders of foreign Ministers rank and above, paid 150 visits to Africa, and about 450 African counterparts paid 609 visits to China (Ruchita 2007). At the end of January 2007, Chinese president Hu Jintao launched a twelve-day tour of Africa covering eight countries: Cameroon, Namibia, Mozambique, the Seychelles, Sudan, South Africa, Zambia and Liberia. That was the second of its type in less than a year. In April 2006, he visited Morocco, Nigeria and Kenya. These visits are not merely overtures on the part of China's leadership. They are illustrative of the premium that China places on its African engagements. The deepening of political and economic involvement in Africa is

realized through a mix of aid, special concessions, debt relief, scholarships, the provision of educational and medical training personnel and infrastructural investment projects. This represents a stark departure from the past under Mao Zedong, when the relationship was guided by the ideological conflict of the Cold War and especially Beijing's attempts to dislodge Moscow's influence in the Third World. Now economic pragmatism and symbolic diplomacy appear to navigate Sino-African relations.

The lynchpin of Sino-African relations is the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), initiated at the Ministerial Conference in Beijing in 2000. The Forum, driven by a joint Ministerial Conference held every three years since 2000, aims at fostering solidarity and cooperation based on equality, consultation, consensus, friendship, partnership and mutual benefit (Hellstrom 2009). It also emphasizes a planned cultivation of a long term relationship. In line with solidarity spirit and common interests, two main issues dominated at the conference. These are the establishment of a just and equitable new international political and economic order that promotes the interests of developing countries in the 21st Century, and strengthening China-Africa cooperation in all spheres (Peiliang 2005). The outcomes of the conference included the Beijing Declaration and the Program for China-Africa Cooperation in Economic and Social Development which laid the basis of the strategic partnership in the new millennium. These underscore the significant purposes of China-Africa cooperation that of addressing both international and domestic factors associated with economic development, a departure from Africa's relations with the West.

Three major goals of the Sino-Africa relationship, as contained in the Beijing Declaration, can be discerned. First, they desire to promote mutual economic development through the elimination of poverty of the majority of the population. This falls in neatly with the international community's preoccupation with poverty alleviation, which is at the top of the global agenda. Second, China and Africa seek to nurture their international competitiveness and capability in economic globalization as a means to elevate their status in international affairs. Third, they aim to develop cooperation to strengthen their bargaining stance with the North for the creation of a new, just and equitable international economic and political order. This should be seen in response to the failure of globalization to promote equal relations. The extent to which these three goals move beyond rhetoric depends on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration. The aim of this article is to historically contextualize FOCAC, explore its future in strengthening the relationship between China and Africa. It addresses the extent of reality of its commitments, promises, opportunities and challenges.

BACKGROUND TO FOCAC

With the unfolding realities of the immediate post Cold War era, the strengthening and institutionalizing relation between China and Africa was considered necessary to reflect the new impulses in the global South. The emergence of a uni-polar world order following the end of the Cold War became an immediate concern for the vast majority of developing countries in the South. The need to establish a new and fair international order, and to deal with the challenge of economic globalization was the overriding objectives for the developing

countries of the world. China is the largest developing country in the world, and Africa is the continent that continent with the largest concentration of developing countries. Therefore, the development of China-Africa relations under the framework of FOCAC is to be seen in this context.

From the historical perspective, FOCAC should be seen as a continuum of the spirit of the Bandung Conference held in Indonesia in 1955 (Alden 2007). What the participating nations had in common was their shared history and perception of white dominance by the West (Foster et al, 2009; Looy, 2006). China and India were the two main drivers at the conference, pushing for newly independent states in the world not to become mired in the ideological battle of the Cold War. In essence, Bandung was also about the spirit of common prosperity, respect for equality, justice, peace and the overall development of the developing world, based on its independent status. The relevance today of the Bandung Conference and what it stood for can be seen as one of the central pillars informing China's foreign policy engagements with the developing world and indeed, China-Africa relations, with FOCAC becoming the platform where dialogue on cooperation and consultation in Sino-African strategic partnership is forged.

The first Forum of China-African Cooperation (FOCAC) held in October 2000 in Beijing. The Forum focused on two major areas: how to promote and establish a just and equitable new international order, and to further strengthen co-operation between China and Africa on economic and social development. This has clearly demonstrated the new character of Sino-African relations in the new era. The Forum reached consensus on a wide range of issues and culminated in the adoption of two important policy documents: the Beijing Declaration, and the Programme of Cooperation on Economic and Social Development (Wenping 2006). It was also decided that there would be a ministerial conference held every three years, alternatively convened in China and Africa. The second FOCAC was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 15-16 December 2003. The main task of the second meeting was to review the implementation of the two documents adopted at the first summit and to explore new ideas and measures to deepen cooperation in key fields such as human resources development, agriculture, infrastructure construction, investment and trade. The meeting concluded with the adoption of the Addis Ababa Action Plan 2004-2006, which reflected consensus by both sides on political issues and other important international issues of common concern (Hellstrom 2009). In particular, the Summit concretized ideas around strengthening cooperation in various fields over the next three years. Alongside the Addis Ababa Forum, the China-Africa Business Conference was also held. Representatives from nearly 100 Chinese enterprises discussed business opportunities and linkages with their African counterparts, which culminated in the signing of many contracts of intent to do business. At the end of 2006, the third Ministerial Meeting of the Forum, together with the first Sino-African Heads of States Summit, was held in Beijing from 3-5 November. The Summit was intended to focus on reducing debts, economic assistance, personal training and investment (Wenping 2006). The new impulse in China's strategic partnership with Africa was officially launched by two significant developments in 2006. The first was the release of the White Paper on China's African Policy, and the second was the speech that President Hu Jintao delivered at the Nigerian Congress during his April visit. In both, the reference to the

concept of developing a new type of China-Africa strategic partnership was made. Although it was not too clearly defined, it signaled the future course for Sino-African relations. In November 2009, about 50 African countries gathered at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh for the fourth FOCAC Ministerial Summit. At the opening ceremony of the fourth FOCAC Ministerial Conference, Premier Wen Jiabao declared eight new measures to strengthen Sino-African cooperation, which included helping Africa to build up financing capacity, providing 10 billion US dollars concessional loans to promote African imports, construction of schools and hospitals, and training of African talents (ChinaAfrica 2009).

The experience of FOCAC over the last nine years has proven to be an important platform and dialogue mechanism for strengthening China-Africa cooperation and solidarity, and safeguarding common interests. This approach to strengthening China-Africa relations is quite different from that which Africa has managed with its traditional development partners. With both sides observing that this relationship can only be a win-win situation, the future of China-Africa relations is definitely moving into an era of rapid development.

FOCAC AND AFRICAN OPPORTUNITY

Through the FOCAC process, China has cancelled Africa's debt, facilitated expanded market access and provided a wide range of new opportunities for positive engagement. FOCAC reflects the form and content of Sino-African relations while mapping a future for both sides to achieve common prosperity. Over the nine years of FOCAC's creation, China has through it, augmented its presence as an important trade and investment partner to Africa. Following the establishment of FOCAC in 2000, bilateral trade flows between China and the African continent have soared to approximately 40 billion US dollars in 2005, an eight-fold increase from 5 billion US dollars recorded in 1995 (Naidu 2007). It got to 100 billion US dollars in 2009 (Hellstrom 2009). This placed China as Africa's third largest trading partner after the European Union and the United States. Within the same period, Chinese imports from Africa rose by 1380 percent (Princeton 2005). In 2005, the top ten African countries exporting to China were, notably the natural resource-rich states of Angola, Sudan, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Nigeria, Algeria, Chad, Egypt and Gabon (Rotberg 2008). In 2006, it was reported that Angola surpassed Saudi Arabia as China's leading oil supplier (Naidu 2007). Oil dominates China's trade relationship with Africa. Other Chinese imports from Africa that were on the top ten list included iron ore, cotton, diamonds, logs, platinum, cobalt, manganese, and refined copper, signaling that China's interests in Africa's extractive sector is in part aligned to the China's economic boom. The complementarity of the Chinese and African economies underpins the rapid growth in two-way trade with Africa exchanging raw materials for China's manufactured products. Although the trade structure has raised questions such as an OECD report warning of a "raw material trap" given the relative phases of economic development, the China-Africa trade relationship is considered largely unavoidable (Chen 2005). The challenge for Africa is to turn raw material exploitation into a foundation for sustainable economic development over the long term. At the same time, the World Bank has emphasized the advantages for consumers arising from the wide availability of low-cost Chinese manufactured products in Africa (Braodman 2007). In addition, China has become a key development donor and investor in Africa. The urgency and commitment

displayed by Chinese corporations has impressed their African hosts and injected a new dynamism into Africa's commercial processes. Evidence to this effect is seen in the various investment projects that are being negotiated with African countries. At present, reports suggest that there are more than 800 Chinese companies in Africa, ranging from big corporates to small to small enterprises, that have invested on the continent and whose operations cover an array of industries (Hellstrom 2009). Recently Beijing signed a 3 billion US dollars iron ore deal with Gabon, which includes the construction of a railway as well as a container port. According to the 2006 World Investment Report, FDI inflows to Africa in 2005 reached a historic height of 31 billion US dollars from 17 billion US dollars in 2004 (Naidu 2007). While the report goes on to highlight that this impressive increase of FDI inflows into the continent of Africa represented a historic growth rate of 78 per cent, which was primarily the consequence of a boom in the global commodity, it is clear that China's deepening involvement in Africa's natural resource sector, especially its demand for raw materials has been the stimulus for Africa's increased FDI inflows in 2005.

While FOCAC has strengthened China's economic interests in Africa, it also provided Beijing with a platform to become a serious humanitarian benefactor to Africa. Since the formation of FOCAC in 2000, Beijing has waived more than 2 billion US dollars in debt of more than thirty African countries and trained more than 10,000 African personnel in both civilian and security sectors. It granted zero tariff rates for 190 products exported to China from sun-Saharan Africa, and engaged in peacekeeping operations in Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia etc. It has also supported the African Union's peace keeping mission in Sudan (Dijk 2009). Under the African Humanitarian Resource Development Fund (AHRDF) established after the first FOCAC in 2000, the Chinese government has offered about 1,500 scholarships every year for Africans to study in China, dispatched around 16,000 medical doctors to work in rural areas, and deployed 700 teachers to work in rural schools across the continent. More recently, through a memorandum of understanding signed with the NEPAD Secretariat, the Chinese government made a 500 million US dollars donation to the Secretariat for medical purposes.

China's successful development model, grounded in strong state management of economic liberalization holds wide appeal in Africa, where states are seeking to escape the poverty trap. African states have been quick to respond to China's fresh approach and agreements on a wide range of issues have been concluded. Some states, such as South Africa have suggested common approach to maximize Africa's benefits, but most African states are satisfied with a bilateral interaction and the rewards which flow from this.

A central element of the China-Africa relationship is the principle of equal rights and respect through which Africa can negotiate with China as equals, seeking mutually beneficial outcomes. Political conditionalities demanded by the Western donor nations hardly feature in China's African interaction (Brautigam 2009). Instead, the focus is on practical, realist and achievable objectives with a common development agenda. China's commitment to develop Africa's infrastructure, education, agriculture and economic development is interpreted as proof of China's intentions to assist Africa over the longer term, rather than simply seek an exploitative relationship based on oil and mineral extraction. Africa has welcomed China's FOCAC commitments to increase aid to Africa and to promote conflict resolution and

post-conflict peace-building in Africa. It is widely acknowledged that China's intervention in Africa over the last few years has significantly altered the continent's traditional dependency on the United States and former colonial Western donors (Alden 2007). Africa now has an alternative source of aid, trade and investment. China's commitment to non-intervention in Africa's domestic affairs and a determination to build partnerships based on equality and mutual respect are widely welcomed. Africa is not treated as a needy aid recipient, as Beijing rather seeks trade and investment partners on a continent predicted to have significant growth potential.

THE CHALLENGES OF FOCAC

The FOCAC framework certainly has encouraging propensity for mutual socio-economic benefits for China and Africa. But there are definite problems and challenges that assail the FOCAC process, and what it hopes to actualize. Some of these are inherent dangers that may undermine Africa's position in FOCAC. There are increasing reports of social protests rising in China as a result of the 'collapse of the old safety-net' which has guaranteed employment but now has '...left some households vulnerable' (Ravallion and Chenn 2005: 2). In 2005, more than 3 million people took part in 58,000 social protests, an increase of over 15 per cent from the previous year according to official statistics. The disputes focused mainly on wages, social welfare problems, the restructuring of state-owned enterprises and evictions (Lim 2006). These demonstrations were aimed against the government's reform process and confirmed that the growing dissatisfaction amongst China's socially marginalized centered on the fact that the economic boom was not benefiting them. While these social protests demonstrate that there are increasing expectations for social justice, China's leadership has become keenly aware of the implications this will have if such expectations are not addressed. From this perspective it becomes important for the current Chinese leadership to be cautious about how much development assistance, concessional loans and grants, or for that matter, how many doctors, teachers and other professionals, it can afford to continue giving Africa. Despite the fact that China has become a 'second generation donor', the Chinese leadership will have to consider how this may affect its political legitimacy at home. Since not all have benefited from Deng Xiaoping's famous call 'to get rich', President Hu and future Chinese leaders can ill-afford to ignore the mounting social tensions that could endanger the future of China's political, economic and social establishment. Justifying to its people why it is supporting Africa's development programme while not building a viable social safety net for the poor at home, will be a hard task for Beijing

As China increases its presence in Africa, its been exposed to confrontations in form of riots, attacks and other forms of economically and politically motivated violence that has been directed at Chinese citizens and investments in Africa. This is partly explained by the fact that Chinese companies have been inclined to take bigger risks than their Western counterparts and even looking for business opportunities in locations left vacant by others (Hellstrom 2009). While Chinese investments and citizens are at times the victims of indiscriminate violence and crime in high-risk rates, they have also been consciously targeted in several situations. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in Nigeria has been conducting attacks against the government for years on the grounds that the

oil producing areas do not receive a fair share of the oil revenue. MEND warned the Chinese and other foreign against investing in the Niger Delta area. More than a dozen of Chinese nationals from a variety of Chinese companies were kidnapped eventually, but were later released (Shinn 2009; Naidu 2007). Similar experiences have been the case in Southern Kordofan, which borders Darfur, where oil operations protected by Sudan's government have come under attack. The Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) seized Chinese oil facilities as a warning to China that its support for Khartoum should cease.

Concerns are expressed that China is opportunistic, extractive and exploitative (Rotberg 2008). Particularly in the extractive industry and Africa's development future, the behaviour of China has been labeled a form of new colonialism and neo-imperialism (Naidu 2007). Discontent communities, in which Chinese enterprises operate, perceive the companies as not contributing enough to local economies and employment. Chinese entrepreneurs rarely employ local workers from Africa. They are rather accustomed to bringing labourers from China, and most management positions are filled by Chinese nationals (Anshan 2007). Importing Chinese labour to complete Chinese organized infrastructural and mining projects inhibits skill transfers and reduces indigenous employment growth. Africans and Westerners certainly complain. Examples of critique directed against China's role in Africa include is unfair competition by offering low-cost products. So many African markets are flooded with Chinese goods which are often of better quality and cheaper than local products. While some African consumers may be happy, parallel domestic industries, especially textile industries suffer as a result. This fact is evidenced by the two mass demonstrations in Dakar, one in support of Chinese merchants, the other in opposition (Anshan 2007). Similar protests have occurred in South Africa. In the case of South Africa, tensions dissipated when Sino-South African government discussions over the issue led China to unilaterally impose quotas upon its textile exports in order to allow the South African producers, time to make their products competitive.

In the medium to longer term, China's engagement with Africa through FOCAC may be advanced or constrained by three scenarios that the World Economic Forum developed in 2005. Especially the first argues that as the US and the EU become increasingly inward looking with regard to their economic policies as a result of protectionism and social concerns and the failure of the Doha Development Round, China may see increasing and strengthening regional ties with Asia as the more obvious way of keeping its economy buoyant and fulfilling its social responsibility. Predicting that Africa remains a primary exporter and fails to diversify its economic base, this scenario could mean that Africa remains at the margins of China's economic strategy. In reality Asia has more to offer China in meeting its economic expectations, that is, geographical proximity, a growing services industry and a skilled workforce which can help to reduce the production costs associated with China's growing ageing problem. While it is asserted that China will continue to expand its relations with Latin America and Africa, it is not certain that Africa can play a constructive role in China's geo-political and economic strategy in the way that Asia, or to a lesser extent Latin America, will do.

CONCLUSION

The expanding Sino-African interaction under the framework of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation has been investigated. Since its inception in 2000, the Forum has acted as vehicle through which China-Africa relations have been strengthened. Through the Forum's process, China has cancelled Africa's debt. Expanded market access has also been facilitated providing a wide range of new opportunities for China's positive engagement with Africa. Be that as it may, there are definite challenges and realities that raise important questions about possible dangers that may undermine Africa's position in FOCAC. As a result of the imbalance in economic power between China and individual African states, the relations tend to echo the dependency type of relationship, and reinforce the old model of state patrimonialism. Among other things, importing Chinese labour to complete Chinese organized infrastructural and mining projects inhibits skill transfers and reduces indigeneous employment growth. Doing so also breeds resentment as does the undercutting of local merchants and industrialists by the supply of cheaper Chinese goods or sharper entrepreneurial instincts. If Africans are to stand on equal footing with Chinese entrepreneurs, and ensure mutual gain in this new strategic partnership, they need to join forces and channel Chinese energies and capital in directions that benefits Africa as much as they benefit China. Developing an African Consensus is imperative. This will ensure an effective monitoring and regulatory framework put in place to oversee that investment practices are conducted appropriately and legally and most of all that their citizens are the main beneficiaries of this partnership. Only by fashioning a collective response can Africans throughout the continent turn China's massive and multifaceted drive into Africa to their sustainable best advantage.

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