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The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) - Political rationale and functioning

The 5th Forum for China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) will be held in Beijing in July 2012. The Forum, established for the first time in October 2000 in Beijing, constitutes a platform for African and Chinese policymakers to enhance China's relations with African countries. The years since 2000 have seen growing political, economic and diplomatic interests in China-Africa relations, attracting global attention toward China's engagement in Africa. This has led to increasing analysis, research and studies which seek to better understand Sino-African partnerships and cooperation. FOCAC has deepened China-Africa's relations in various fields: politics, economics, investments, trade, south-south cooperation and aid; etc. For Chinese and African officials, FOCAC constitutes a multilateral platform to evaluate the achievements and discuss the perspectives of Sino-African relations. This paper explores the political partnership element of FOCAC and looks into the workings of the institutions.

The FOCAC meeting is dominated by economic topics, but China's engagement in Africa has retained some of the political elements and motivations that were at the beginning of the relationship. FOCAC much resembles institutions such as the Franco-African Summit, the Commonwealth Conference or the Tokyo International Conference of African Development (TICAD). A sense of Chinese competition with Western powers can thus be assumed in the establishment of the forum – and has driven other emerging powers like India and Turkey to establish high-level meetings with African officials, too. Even if predominantly driven by the continuous supply of raw materials from and market access to African countries, the FOCAC relationship continues to have a strong political dimension beyond its public relations value.

Institutionalisation of relations with Africa as a challenge for Beijing

Despite continuity in rhetoric, China's relations with African states have undergone cycles (see box 1). The currently dominant economic rationale has also had a strong political element throughout. Policies paved the way for globalisation of Chinese business – and increasingly, China has become a

political actor abroad. In the late 1990s, some countries (including Ethiopia, Mauritius and Madagascar) pushed for a joint exchange of China and Africa *as a group*. A high degree of institutionalisation in the asymmetric relationship between a continent and a country was initially met with scepticism in Beijing. China traditionally prefers bilateral relations and its policy thrust is towards more global multipolarity, rather than multilateralism. The understanding of multilateralism is often limited to joint summits, albeit accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 changed this slightly. Yet, relatively little institutionalisation is usually aspired toward. After a broadening of China's international relations in the late 1990s, the year 2000 saw the political situation in Beijing offering an opportunity to institutionally upgrade its Africa relations; suggestions from Africa met a more receptive environment, resulting in a first FOCAC meeting in Beijing.

The ministerial meeting in Beijing in October 2000 was part of China's strategic foreign policy towards Africa to secure its diplomatic and economic interests and position herself in the global political and economic order. Amongst the goals formulated for the first meeting was the treating of each

member state as an equal and respecting each other's sovereignty and not interfering in each other's internal affairs, as well as seeking mutual development and enhancing consultation and cooperation in international affairs.

Since then, ministerial meetings have been organised in Addis Ababa (2003), Beijing (2006) and Sharm-el-Sheikh (2009). FOCAC III, held in Beijing, has received most public attention; it was the first meeting held as a full-fledged China-Africa summit. African presidents and heads of state, high-level representatives from 48 countries as well as entrepreneurs attended the FOCAC summit in Beijing in November 2006. Well before this meeting, in January 2006, Beijing published a policy paper called *China Africa Policy*, symbolically underlining a long-term interest in Africa.

From the Chinese side, the debate is more centred on an economic, diplomatic and political framework relying on South-South cooperation. Declarations after summits are a key diplomatic tool in international relations. Like other summit declarations, these documents list all points of agreement and assess the situation between the actors. Resulting joint actions are put under action plans to provide guidelines for projects financing and implementation. Action plans are also offering opportunities to announce a number of measures to be taken in relation to each FOCAC meeting (see table 1).

Weak follow-up mechanisms for FOCAC

Only China, South Africa and Ethiopia have some institutional mechanisms for monitoring progress and further planning. In most other cases, such decision-making occurs on an ad hoc basis. The African diplomatic corps in Beijing is coordinated by the longest serving Ambassador from Africa and thus highly dependent on personality. Regional organisations – such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) or the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – offer some framework for coordination amongst diplomats in Beijing. The degree of coordination and internal cohesion within regional frameworks varies substantially, though.

A Chinese Follow-up Committee of FOCAC is located in the Africa Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and needs to coordinate with the Department of West Asian and Africa in the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), where for instance the Department of Foreign Aid is located. Also involved is the Chinese Ministry of Finance. China EXIM Bank is responsible for implementation of projects, including feasibility studies. The Chinese bank has a veto right on projects in the light of its own regulations, which include funding procedures and environmental regulations. The Chinese Follow-up Committee holds meetings with the African diplomatic corps every two to three months.

Consequently, projects and their implementation are mostly driven by Chinese institutions.

The African side appears to be mostly reactive to Chinese proposals, including draft Action Plans for the triennial FOCAC meetings. Civil society organisations are not systematically included in any of the committees; FOCAC relations are state-to-state interactions. Sino-African engagement at regional or continental policy level is limited. The African Union Commission became a full FOCAC member in 2010 and has benefitted from the highly symbolic donation of a headquarter building entirely funded by the Chinese government. Yet, cross-country infrastructure or direct assistance to African regional organisations does not feature high on the FOCAC agenda thus far.

China has gained a reputation for sticking to commitments made during FOCAC (see the *CCS research report on FOCAC*, published 2010). This adds to the tangible disillusionment many African elites already have in European institutions and their promises. However, implementation is sometimes unexpectedly slow. One such case is the setting-up of (functioning) special economic zones, of which only one – in Zambia – is fully operational at the time of writing. Others, like in Mauritius, have set up the infrastructure, but still await Chinese investors. Also, the China-Africa Development Fund (CADFund) reportedly finds it difficult to attribute its funding to sufficient numbers of projects across the continent.

FOCAC V in Beijing 2012: change of leadership and the next level of reforms

While the biggest and most eye-catching event was the summit in Beijing in 2006, the summit in Sharm el Sheikh in 2009 was a more down-toned event. This might have been an effect of the financial crisis, and also prevented the racing to ever-bigger commitments on the Chinese side. This could have been triggered by outside criticism about insufficient clarity on underlying concepts when making commitments, such as 'doubling aid' when the Chinese understanding of what constitutes aid was only officially defined by the China Aid Policy in 2011. It will, however, also have been a reaction to ever-rising expectations on the African side, which increasingly turn to China for help and attention. These requests are hardly ever based on an analysis of China's political will and capacity and thus are often unrealistic. Given the persisting needs and political tensions in China, Beijing's attention rests predominantly on issues of domestic development.

FOCAC was inaugurated under Chinese President Jiang Zemin. It was, however, shaped by President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, both of whom came into leadership functions in 2002. Both will leave their party functions in October 2012 and their state functions in March 2013.

In March 2012, premier Wen Jiabao's speech at the National People's Congress centred on urgent political and economic

Table 1: Overview of commitments made during FOCAC meetings.

FOCAC I (2000)	FOCAC II (2003)	FOCAC III (2006)	FOCAC IV (2009)
<p>Financial commitments Debt cancellation of up to RMB 10 billion for the HIPC and LDC countries in Africa within 2 years.</p> <p>Trade and investment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • give preference to import of African products “in the light of demands and conditions of the Chinese market” • ensure operation of <i>Investment and Trade Promotion Centres</i> by China in Africa and assist African states to set up similar entities in China. • establish a China-Africa Joint Business Council • create a China-Africa Products Exhibition Centre in China • China will provide special funds to support Chinese investments in Africa <p>Capacity building</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • send additional medical teams to Africa, including equipment, in order to train local medical staff. • establish an African Human Resources Development Fund (AHRDF) <p>Environmental cooperation In areas including pollution control, biodiversity conservation, protection of forests, fisheries and wildlife management.</p>	<p>Financial commitments China will continue to increase assistance for African countries (no figures provided)</p> <p>Trade and investment China will grant tariff-free access to some commodities from LDCs</p> <p>Capacity building China will train up to 10,000 African personnel in various fields within 3 years</p> <p>Cultural cooperation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China will sponsor an art festival focussing on African arts and a Chinese cultural presentation in Africa. • China will hold a China-Africa Youth Festival in China in 2004. <p>Other China will grant Approved (Tourism) Destination Status to eight African countries for Chinese citizens who cover their own expenses.</p>	<p>Financial commitments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Double aid to Africa by 2009 (2006 as benchmark year) • provide US\$ 3 billion as preferential loans US\$ 2 billion as preferential buyer’s credits within 3 years • provide RMB 300 million (ca. US\$ 40 million) for artemisin (anti-malaria drug), • Cancel government debt; namely: matured interest-free loans due in 2005 owed by HIPC and LDCs. <p>Trade and investment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set up the China-Africa Development Fund (CADFund), an investment fund with US\$ 5 billion capital • increase the number of zero-tariff export items from 190 to 440 for the 30 least developed African countries • establish 3 to 5 trade and economic cooperation zones in Africa within 3 years. <p>Capacity building Within 3 years: train 15,000 African professional, send 100 senior agricultural experts, set up 10 special agricultural centres, build 30 malaria prevention centres, dispatch 300 youth volunteers, and increase the number of scholarships for African students from 2,000 to 4,000 per year.</p> <p>Infrastructure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • build an African Union conference centre • build 100 rural schools • build 30 hospitals 	<p>Financial commitments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide US\$ 10 billion in concessional loans • provide US\$ 1 billion for African small and medium size business • cancel debt associated with interest-free government loans due to mature by the end of 2009 <p>Trade and investment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • duty-free and quota-free treatment for 95% of products from African LDCs <p>Capacity building</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • launch China-Africa science and technology partnership, carry out 100 joint demonstration projects on science and technology research and receive 100 African post-doctoral fellows in China. • train 20,000 professionals in various fields • increase the number of agricultural demonstration centres to 20, send 50 agricultural technology teams, and train 2,000 agricultural experts • launch a China-Africa joint research and exchange programme. • build 50 China-Africa friendship schools and train 1,500 school principals; increase government scholarships to Africa to 5,500 within 3 years.

Source: Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.

reforms. He claimed that gradual and orderly reforms are essential for China and that such reforms will involve a series of challenges if one considers the leadership transition that will occur in China in March 2013. New appointments at China’s Politburo Standing Committee and the end of Hu Jintao’s term will lead to more internal and external changes respectively within China and in China’s political, economic and diplomatic relationship with its partner countries, African countries included. China can be expected to face mounting challenges in the years to come – and consequently Beijing is likely to turn increasingly towards domestic challenges first, despite rising investment levels in Africa.

Conclusions

While China has clear programmes for the FOCAC meetings, Africa – consisting of 54 states, of which 50 have diplomatic relations with Beijing – has a structural disadvantage and cannot present one detailed agenda vis-à-vis Beijing. While outcomes are of paramount importance, multilateral settings nevertheless require a functioning process. The FOCAC follow-up is far less institutionalised and mostly driven bilaterally; there is no joint secretariat or other monitoring entity. Coordination thus is ad hoc with African diplomatic missions in Beijing and through the Chinese embassies in African countries.

Box 1: Overview over the historical development of China-Africa relations

Following the initial foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country was committed to 'revolutionary internationalism' and supported Nkrumah's Ghana and movements such as UNITA in Angola or the Pan-African Congress (PAC) in South Africa. After Beijing broke ties with Moscow in 1959, China's engagement in Africa rivalled the West *and* the Soviet Union, yet with fewer resources. Setbacks to China-Africa relations occurred with either the toppling of African partner regimes – Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah ironically was overthrown while on a visit to China in 1966 – or with the emergence of more successful political movements than the ones Beijing supported across Africa. Domestic turmoil in China after a dramatically failed 'Great Leap forward' in the late 1950s, and a subsequent large-scale famine in China, added to a slowing down of interactions.

China's relations with African states re-emerged in the early 1970s, after the People's Republic of China was voted into the United Nations (UN) as the sole representative of China. The replacement of the Taiwan-based Guomindang government with Beijing, including in the UN Security Council, was mainly due to the high number of African votes in favour of Mainland China's inclusion in the UN General Assembly. Yet again, however, internal problems during the 'Cultural Revolution' in China and the death of Premier Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong detracted Beijing's attention away from Africa. The political focus after Mao, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, was on (re-)building the Chinese economy. Catering for Chinese internal needs, international engagement in the developing world was scaled down, even though the relationships never came to a complete standstill. Throughout those years (and to date), Chinese medical teams, for instance, have been sent to African countries.

Deng's successful strategy resulted in the continuing growth of China's economy after an 'opening up' of the economy in the 1980s. A consequential next step was the formulation of a 'going out' policy in 1998, encouraging Chinese enterprises to seek activities beyond China. This engagement did not specifically focus on the African continent. Yet, Africa offered good conditions for Chinese political interests. Africa's wealth in resources is making much of the continent economically complementary to an economically thriving China. Additionally, Western countries decreased their engagement in Africa throughout the 1990s; the continent, at the time, was thus economically little contested by competitors. With internal tensions in China escalating in Tiananmen in June, 1989, Beijing was criticised (and briefly shunned) by Western powers. In its diplomatic attempts to find allies, China turned to African states, following its historical memory of where political support could be found. Since the late 1990s, the Chinese foreign minister has made it a tradition to start his year with travels to African countries.

Recommendations

Having a much-longed-for business partner instead of a donor, requires African actors engage with these partners at the level of business, not aid. In this setting, African states will need to focus their demands towards China and engage more in a business and market rationale.

Institutionalised follow-up committees should be established in participating countries' administrations – and at regional level. These committees could assess the different commitments (related to trade, investments and aid), supervise implementation and seek solutions wherever difficulties or conflicting interests occur.

Coordination at regional level in Africa should be improved. African policymakers should coordinate, in order to make cooperation fruitful to individual countries *and* to regional communities. Beijing's increasing interest in regional organisations could, for instance, be channelled to support regional action plans.

Given the diversity of African actors, the inclusiveness of engagement should increase; inviting academics, civil society, and NGOs to debates during FOCAC V would be of great importance for China and Africa for a number of political reasons. There have been individual attempts thus far to bring think tanks and business into the discussion around FOCAC; these need to be broadened. Only by including a wider range of actors can an China-Africa economic partnership and cooperation become politically sustainable and innovative.

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