

China–Africa Cooperation: A Model for South–South Cooperation



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1 China–Africa Cooperation: Context, Evolution and Future Direction

Africa has forged cooperation and partnerships with major regions and economies like the EU, the USA, China, Japan, France, Germany, Russia, the Arab League, India, Turkey, South America and Korea, among others. Yet, no other partnership has attracted as much attention or as much scrutiny as the China–Africa partnership. The reasons for this attention vary. It is, however, not the intention here to delve into those now.

Partnership and cooperation are undertaken on the basis of a political will—from both sides—to promote their interests through each other, and benefits can occur through the synergy this creates. This article explores China–Africa cooperation over the last two decades through this prism, accounting too for the current challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and well beyond.

1.1 The Evolution of China–Africa Cooperation

China–Africa cooperation is an intergovernmental process, and as such, it is assumed that both sides must aim at articulating not only the purpose and objectives of cooperation but also define the goals as to what they both desire to achieve from the cooperation.

The opinions expressed in this essay are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the institution he represents.

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Cooperation is effective and sustainable when there is strong political commitment and both sides share benefits fairly. In some cases (though not all), this may also mean sharing benefits equally. In all cases, an organizational framework and well-defined areas of cooperation further enable both sides to make optimal use of their cooperation.

China and Africa enjoy long-standing and historical relations which were elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership in 2018 during the Beijing FOCAC Summit. The formation of Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) two decades ago took the existing relations between Africa and China to a new height. The institutionalization of the cooperation framed not only areas of cooperation, but it also made it predictable and measurable.

For instance, the 2018 FOCAC Summit agreed on eight major initiatives.¹ For China, the initiatives fit in with China’s Belt and Road objectives and the domestic strategy at the time known as “Made in China 2025”, while for Africa, the key priority was to fit the initiatives with Agenda 2063 of the African Union (AU).² For both sides, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, agreed to in 2015, were also relevant.

1.2 *The Narratives*

Many analysts, policy- and decision-makers, and international media have been preoccupied in narrating their perceptions and views on this particular partnership. Some tend to sound ideologically driven, while others fall short on evidence. Some even gravitate to speculation. As a result, many lack balance, objectivity and suffer from some elements of prejudice in all directions. To the astonishment of many, the most dominant narratives about China and Africa tend not to be set by those who own the partnership, but by outsiders. This does not in any way imply that others cannot hold views or share their opinions on the matter, as all of us are entitled to air out our notions and we should respect diversity of opinion. It is simply to point out gaps, especially in amplifying African perspectives.

Some two decades ago, *The Economist Magazine* came out with a headline, “Africa—a hopeless continent”, precisely when the FOCAC came into existence. The time is very interesting to note. The same magazine ten years later featured a new headline, “Africa rising”. That is how narratives are set about Africa. Africa is a huge and diverse continent, yet hasty and sweeping generalizations are often made.

The recent narrative that China is “colonizing Africa” economically is strongly refuted by African leaders and not corroborated by evidence. To talk about neocolonialism in the twenty-first century, in whatever form or shape, is simply mind boggling. First, it diminishes the true horrors that were suffered by Africans and

¹ MFA, PRC (2018) industrial promotion infrastructure connectivity trade facilitation, green development actions, capacity building activities, health care, people to people exchange and peace and security.

² AU (2013) Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want.

Black people across the world due to slavery, colonialism and apartheid—memories of which are still very vivid in many African minds. Second, Africans are mature enough not to allow neocolonialism by China or any other power for that matter. It is also a puzzling paradox for many observers that those who criticize Africa for its engagement with China and those who gratify such a prejudice against the partnership do far more businesses with China than Africa. Furthermore, while natural resources do dominate Africa’s exports to China, narratives that China is in Africa simply for natural resource extraction do not reveal the whole picture of the partnership as there is cooperation in several other sectors. For instance, Ethiopia and China have one of the strongest partnerships in FDI, trade, technology transfers, human resources development and infrastructure development and economic cooperation; not based on natural resources. Even in the case of importing natural resources, China’s participation is carried out with the permission of partnering African countries, and indeed, many other countries have the same trade practices with African nations. Finally, many try to narrow down China–Africa cooperation merely to an economic level, but Yun (2018) indicated the diversity of the cooperation—including political, peace and security, and building social and cultural ties.

2 The Essence of the China–Africa Partnership

“If you want to go fast, go alone and if you want to go far, go together,” is the African wisdom of expressing the need for unity and solidarity. I believe that China–Africa cooperation has, at its crux, made a choice to go together and to go far.

Many global geopolitical observers tend to agree that the current global situation is volatile, complex and uncertain. No country, big nor small, developed or developing, south or north, east or west, can handle the enormous challenges facing human kind on its own. Hence, to navigate through uncertain and fast changing global situations, the need for partnership and strong multilateralism cannot be over-emphasized. This is not to say that existing partnerships or multilateralism are perfect—but they are the basis for moving forward. Therefore, the China–Africa partnership should also be seen in this context, as a leveled platform of purpose and of action to forge a concerted intercontinental approach for mutually beneficial partnership and responses. And judging from the complimentary nature of multifaceted areas of interaction and the convergence of interests, partnership between China and Africa is not only important, but it is absolutely necessary.

Let me elaborate. Africa is a continent of 55 countries, with a voting block of 28% at the United Nations (UN) and a population of 1.3 billion, of which the majority are young and productive, and with a land area of 30.37 million sq km and is endowed with considerable natural resources. To partner with China, a country of 1.4 billion people, with a land area of 9.6 million sq km², the world’s second largest economy, the largest manufacturer and exporter and second largest importer, inter alia, is unmistakably unavoidable.

3 Principles Governing Africa–China Cooperation

The partnership between Africa and China is and must continue to be based on core principles of equality, mutual trust, respect and interest. The principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries remains a particular foundation for the political trust between the two sides. Both sides uphold the rights of sovereign nations to choose their economic development and governance models and policies. Unlike the liberal world order that prescribed one set of economic development and governance models for all countries or “one-size-fits-all”, without taking into account the socioeconomic, political, cultural and historical contexts of each country, the China–Africa partnership respects policy independence for each partnering country to make its own policy choices as it finds a fit for its own situation. An Ethiopian saying to this effect goes like this: “Only witch craft knows one better than oneself”. It is also democratic to respect the rights of nations to make their own choices, chart their courses forward and determine their own destinations. In other words, no one knows better what is good or bad better than oneself. This, however, should not be interpreted as a disregard for coming together to tackle common challenges and concerns. It rather emphasizes the importance of defining parameters, standards and goals within which partners engage together to achieve a mutually beneficial and satisfactory results. It also refutes the temptation to impose models from outside that do not respect the choices and conditions of partnership.

Such guiding principles are solid foundations for a cordial friendship and political trust that have created ample economic, social and political benefits for the peoples of China and Africa. Let me hasten to stress here that only mutually beneficial partnerships can be sustainable, and conversely, an asymmetrical, skewed partnership stands little chance of survival and is destined to yield unsatisfactory results. It must also be noted that as much as Africa needs China, China also needs Africa. Therefore, there is convergence of interests for the two sides to cooperate, collaborate and partner on issues of common interest and concern, whether at the bilateral, regional or multilateral level.

The interests from both sides have been clear for more than 40 years.

4 Going Global: Chinese Reform and Opening up

China has achieved what can only be described as a phenomenally fast social and economic transformation over the past 40 years that is marked by a successful path of reform and opening up. During this period, China lifted over half a billion of its citizens out of absolute poverty, something unparalleled in the recent history of development. The government declared it would make rural poverty the thing of the past in 2020, which has now been realized. This was also achieved under the unusual circumstances of COVID-19 and is certainly worth celebrating. The achievement in

social and economic transformation has inspired many in Africa to learn and borrow best practices from China.

Inspired by the profound social and economic success of China, other emerging economies and developing countries, including Ethiopia, have been attracted by China’s economic progress and made efforts to adapt some of its best practices to their own settings. This is a very sensible and rational decision as China stands out as a lodestar for impressive structural transformation to many countries in the world.

The long-standing relations between China and Africa created a fertile ground for the “Going Global” Chinese policy that encouraged Chinese enterprises to engage in outbound investment. Africa was considered as one of the new frontiers for Chinese investment. While there is much more to come, Chinese enterprises “went out” and found market and investment opportunities in Africa, while Africans also began to benefit from Chinese investment in manufacturing and infrastructure development, trade, tourism, technology transfer and human resource development, making engagement win–win for both sides. These initial capital inflows to Africa have placed China firmly at the wheel of the discourse of development in numerous countries in Africa. That said, Africa gets about 5% of outbound Chinese investment, and the trade between the two makes about 4% of China’s trade volume. The potential of this partnership is thus yet to be fully realized.

How can this be realized? Institutional mechanisms can help, in particular FOCAC.

5 Institutionalizing the China–Africa Partnership

To guide and shape the ever-growing interactions between China and Africa, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was instituted, and has been the main platform for China–Africa partnership since the year 2000. FOCAC is not a mere concept that defines one country as the only actor or organizer-in-chief in the process. In fact, it clearly implies a common journey of both African countries and China, which takes domestic and international resolving and channeling them toward a shared destiny with an incremental course of synergetic cooperation.

Under FOCAC, African countries have the potential to access China’s accumulated industrial, technological and production capacity and financial resources. China can play a pivotal role in enhancing connectivity, infrastructure development and industrialization in Africa. Chinese investments are already creating employment opportunities and contributing to Africa’s economic growth and also transfer knowledge, skill and technology. A 2019 ODI study, for instance, found that Chinese factories that have opened in Ethiopia use local people for 90% of all jobs (and 100% for low-skilled jobs). But more importantly, it offers an opportunity for African countries to strategize together to ensure that the relationship delivers even more benefits to Africa.

Since its inception, FOCAC has proved to be an effective cooperation mechanism between Africa and China. The Sixth FOCAC Summit held in South Africa in

December 2015 clearly underlined the importance of FOCAC in pursuing the socio-economic and political interests of both Africa and China. The Johannesburg Action Plan for the period 2016–2018 was given impetus by a pledge of USD 60 billion by President Xi Jinping at the summit, as well as several outcomes—demanded by African leaders—focusing on increasing and diversifying exports from Africa to China. This could be taken as concrete demonstration of strong commitment and partnership between the two parties.

In September 2018, at the FOCAC Summit in Beijing, another USD 60 billion was earmarked for eight areas of cooperation: industrial promotion, infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation, green development, capacity building, health, people-to-people exchanges and peace and security. This political commitment of the Chinese leadership to the mutually beneficial and strategic partnership with Africa for common growth and prosperity has created a rare historic opportunity in pursuing a win–win and sustainable partnership.

The goals set forth in various declarations are priorities for Africa and hence reflect mutual interest. Full implementation of the pledges made at the summit is of course still in progress. To that effect, action plans were worked out at the coordinators meeting in June 2018 and after the summit were followed up with further coordination meetings, with a view to the next summit later this year.

FOCAC serves as a platform for dialog, consultation and cooperation between China and African countries, and it has become a model of south–south cooperation. Over the course of nearly two decades, China has become Africa's biggest economic partner in trade, investment, infrastructure development, financing and development assistance. China also takes an active interest in peace and security programs and missions in Africa, working together to realize a peaceful, prosperous and integrated Africa, which are the key pillars of the 2063 African Agenda.

Currently, there are no other countries with such a depth and breadth of engagement in Africa as China, as illustrated by recent studies. The concrete results of cooperation on the ground in Africa speak volumes for themselves.

Another milestone in the China–Africa partnership that complements FOCAC is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), first announced in 2013. Given that the Belt and Road Initiative has its own vision and action plan, dedicated political arena, financial institutions and resources, it will not simply count as proof of FOCAC's achievements, but should reinforce and expand the scope and depth of cooperation. Currently, 46 of the 53 countries with diplomatic relations with China are participating in the Belt and Road Initiative, which means that resources in addition to those under FOCAC may well become available under the BRI. But perhaps more importantly, it also means that cooperation areas that are being promoted under the initiative and FOCAC, such as industrialization and infrastructure can receive even stronger political support from China, which may help fast track the implementation of projects in those areas.

As the BRI is not limited to bilateral relations between China and African countries, but aims to connect Asia, Europe and Africa, and African Belt and Road

Initiative countries can benefit from new connections and expand cooperation with countries along the Maritime Silk Road in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

Let me be very clear here. Like any partnership, the China–Africa partnership has never been spared from criticism, misperception and often times suffers from gross generalizations that lack an evidence-based approach. One should always bear in mind that when talking about the success or failure of such a partnership, both context and micro-level analyses are important. Africa’s partnerships with other countries must be equally examined with respect to their benefits, while different African countries themselves have widely varying trade and finance relationships with China (and other partners), depending on their development situations. Africa, however, continues to suffer from being treated as a single entity, and generalization of this diverse and huge continent is bound to be misleading.

Let me also add that there is no country or region or continent that can afford to avoid China or Africa. But, it is how countries or regions see Africa and China that matters—as equal entities, entities to be trusted or entities to be instructed. It is clear that the first attitude is the right attitude. As indicated above, it is obvious that Africa also has partnership with multiple countries and unions. And from my experience, the Africa–China relationship is based on equality. But, why is there so much noise surrounding China–Africa relations? Are we running the risk of politicizing it or are we lacking impartiality and objectivity?

I believe Africans are equal partners, who can differentiate what is good and what is bad for ourselves. The patronizing attitude by some who set patchy narratives about the partnership does not seem to be in good faith.

Do not get me wrong, I am not saying that this is a perfect partnership. No!! No partnership is perfect. The China–Africa partnership is not perfect. There are challenges related to capacity to implement projects, lack of technological capability, issues related to good governance, trade imbalances, value addition, terms of loans and so on. But, I am in the position to know first-hand that these are challenges that are being addressed progressively and in particular through the framework of FOCAC. Indeed, the solution to imperfections is more cooperation—not less.

So, what, if anything, has changed in the Africa–China relationship due to COVID-19 and what does this mean for the future?

6 COVID-19 and China–Africa Cooperation

When the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan was made public, the African Union Commission (AUC), and many African leaders, and African Ambassadors directly expressed their strong solidarity and support to the people and government of China. Within China, the large numbers of African students in China, including those from Ethiopia, despite the uncertain times, was highly compliant and patient as China began its efforts to defeat COVID-19. While there were some initial racist incidents where larger Black communities living in China, these were denounced by African leaders and addressed with vigor by Chinese officials. African Ambassadors were

thus able to verify and have confidence in the measures put in place by the Government of China to protect against and control of the virus to the benefit of all people, including African citizens in China. Those African nations that had the means—such as South Africa and Equatorial Guinea also sent emergency medical equipment as a sign of friendship and solidarity, and some governments organized support for citizens to return to their African homes in an orderly and safe manner.

Because of the stringent measures put in place, the elaborate and consistent execution of containment policies and strategies and most importantly the unity of purpose displayed by the Chinese people, African and other migrants in China, China contained the virus in a shorter time than many expected. The effectiveness of the measures also yielded very positive results and mitigated any long-term negative social or economic impacts on Chinese society. Now, China is steadily returning to normalcy and reopening the economy in an orderly fashion, while simultaneously working to vaccinate the population as required.

As the spread of COVID-19 steadily declined in China and as began to be confirmed in Africa, the Chinese government, and other stakeholders like the Alibaba Foundation led by Jack Ma, extended their support and solidarity to African countries. For instance, several batches of badly needed medical supplies, such as diagnostic kits and PPE, were donated to all African countries. Medical teams flew to several African countries, including those to support Chinese citizens living those countries, and literally hundreds of online webinars were arranged, including those with the UN, to share experiences and expertise in diagnosis, testing and treating COVID-19. In addition, in terms of procurement, China ramped up production so as to remain open to exports of medical equipment, while many other countries suspended exports and directed them to internal use. Many private and public sector enterprises which have investment and trade links with African countries carried out their corporate social responsibility in a very commendable way, and they continue to do so.

Overall, I can confidently say that no other country has provided as much direct health support as China has done to Africa in these trying times. And, direct support continues, with recent announcements of vaccine donations to several African countries, albeit in initially small quantities. In contrast, though understandably, many others simply looked inside and grappled with their own situations and continue to do so.

The impact of COVID-19, however, goes far beyond health challenges. Its effect on social and economic sectors, unless contained effectively and shortly, has had and will continue to pose social unrest, instability and insecurity challenges. Therefore, China–Africa cooperation should not only focus on short-term solutions and in addressing the immediate health concerns due to the pandemic. With such a strong scope for increased mutual economic cooperation, as I have set out earlier, joint efforts in accelerating this to provide remedies and post-COVID-19 economic recovery need to be made urgently. The issue of debt relief and suspension within the agreed framework of the G20 appears to be well under consideration. China has been a leading advocate within the G20 for this joint framework. However, as Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (PhD) said in a recent piece he contributed to *The New York*

Times, this is by no means sufficient to save fragile African economies from collapse. Indeed, debt relief or aid is only one tool out of a box full of possible strategic, sustainable remedies. In other words, the need for post-COVID-19 recovery and reconstruction plan is evidently clear. I also believe that it is time to adjust and prioritize some of the ongoing FOCAC programs in consideration of the new situation dictated by the pandemic.

China already has investments in Africa, but the need to recover from the impact of COVID-19 calls for more investment and economic and trade cooperation. This can provide more jobs and more opportunities for African countries to raise revenue to deal with any future health costs, debt repayments as well as economic support measures to citizens. If not, chances are that the investments made by China so far will be negatively impacted and both sides will incur losses. A recent ODI report suggests that three African projects with Chinese involvement have already been halted or delayed due to COVID-19. Further delays or cancelations are not in the interest of both sides. That is why there is a need for more cooperation and engagement.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the China–Africa partnership is a mutually beneficiary endeavor. It is a work in progress. And with strong commitment and determination, I have no doubt that it will be a model of success for south–south cooperation. It is not a slogan, nor is it empty talk as some allege, but a concrete project delivering results and changing the living conditions of Africans. But, it can do more. In order to overcome the challenges, more cooperation, and not less, is the solution.



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