

Report

China-Africa Relations: Democracy and Delivery

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The recently concluded Fifth Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) adopted the Beijing Action Plan for 2013-2015 that will provide African countries with USD 20 billion as concessional loans for the development of infrastructure, agriculture, and manufacturing. This concessional loan is twice as much as that pledged in 2010. In 2011, trade between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Africa reached USD 260 billion, of which USD 166 billion represented the value of China's exports to Africa. This is a drastic surge from USD 1 billion in 1980. With the financial crises in the United States and Europe, China increased its investment in Africa, causing the value of trade transactions to exceed the value of aid.(1) China is now also engaged in peace and security projects in Africa and has contributed modest auxiliary troops to peacekeeping operations in Darfur, Liberia, the Western Sahara and the Democratic Republic of Congo.(2) Recently, it contributed USD 5 million in peacekeeping equipment to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

The Two Opposing Narratives of the China-Africa Partnership

The China-Africa relationship is interpreted through two diametrically opposed narratives. The pro-China narrative depicts China as a saviour and genuine partner of Africa. For the proponents of this view, China is a partner without a history of colonial aspirations and, in fact, shares with many developing countries a similar historical background. It also is a partner that provides much-needed funding with no conditional strings attached and that appears to understand Africa's priorities. Furthermore, it has a reputation among African countries for respecting other cultures and states.

In contrast, the Sino-phobic narrative depicts China, as the US Secretary Hillary Clinton has, as the new colonial power in Africa. Many western governments see China's engagement in Africa as a cause for concern.(3) In their eyes, China is a spoiler of peace and security in oil-rich countries such as Sudan and a supporter of despots countries such as Zimbabwe and Gabon, which are known for their very poor human rights records.(4) Moreover, China is a resource- and energy-hungry giant, an exploiter of corrupt and incompetent governments, a trade opportunist and a massive polluter of the African environment.

Africa's China and the West's China: The Bless and Blame Game

Needless to say, Africans understand and express their concerns about the trade imbalance, the relatively poor quality of Chinese goods and services and the application of lower standards of environmental practices. The involvement of Chinese companies in corrupt practices, and low labour and safety standards have also been sources of serious debate in many African countries and have featured on election platforms in countries like Zambia and Senegal. The issue of Chinese migrants to Africa and their impact on local labour markets has provoked the backlashes of local communities. Despite the efforts of some African countries such as Ethiopia and Nigeria, the transfer of technology and skills from Chinese companies to Africa remains disappointing.

Nonetheless, literature on the China-Africa partnership unjustifiably perpetuates the very negative perception; media outlets likewise report a highly skewed image against the dictates of raw facts(5) that provide a more positive view. Consequently, it is reported that China invests more in the extractive industry, which amounts to one-third of the total Chinese investment, than in other sectors.(6) Compared to the United States and other developed countries, China's share in African extractive investment in the form of mining, for example, is lower but attains more critical coverage in the media and literature. The remaining two-thirds of China's investment in Africa is in construction, manufacturing and finance.(7) The United States' major investment targets in Africa are Equatorial Guinea, Egypt, South Africa and Angola. The current discourse on China-Africa relations justifiably, but unsatisfactorily, focus on the interest of China in Africa, particularly in energy, natural resources, and markets for Chinese goods and services. The increasing numbers of Chinese migrants seeking work in Africa as well as their impact on local labour markets and their potential to cause conflict with local African communities has recently received extensive coverage. This paper focuses mainly on the impact of the Chinese partnership on the democratisation process in Africa.

China as one of the Global Actors in Africa

An overall mapping of global actors in Africa is very important to correctly assess the negative and positive aspects of China-Africa partnership. China is one of the many important actors in Africa's new economic, peace and security landscape that are

competing for favourable relations with and within Africa. The China-Africa partnership is one of the multiple partnerships the African Union has developed including those with the European Union, India, Turkey, Latin America and the United States. Both the west and the east compete for Africa's resources and markets as well as diplomatic and security preferential spheres of influence. The pragmatic approach of China has elicited strong animosity from western countries not only due to its deflationary impact on western efforts supporting human rights and democracy, but mainly as a result of China's increasing influence on African governments and the control of Africa's resources and markets. Western countries and companies feel that Chinese companies beat them by resorting to bribery and corruption as well as other illegal means and violating international standards and norms of transparency and human rights. The observance of such international norms would prevent China from entering dealings in some African countries, but many western countries and companies have also been found guilty of similar violations in the past.

To understand and accurately describe the overall image of China's engagement with Africa, the views of Africans are important. To many Africans, history matters. China, unlike the West, does not have a threatening historical legacy like the western colonial powers of the past. On the contrary, Africa and China share many similar historical backgrounds. Criticism from the West is seen by Africans with serious misgivings and reservations. Thus, it is not to be taken at face value. In Africa, the China-Africa partnership is blessed by the majority of Africans. Consequently, Africa's China and the West's China are different. To Africans, China's three major attractions are unconditional soft loans and access to capital, quick delivery of services and cheap goods, and its inspirational alternative development history.

In this regard, there are three fundamental causes of shortcomings in the China- Africa relationship. These are 1) the weakness of African states and their legislative, regulatory and enforcement mechanisms coupled by self-serving governments; 2) the Chinese tendency to do business irrespective of concerns related to sustainability, business dealings that are clearly incompatible with the national interests of African countries, and corrupt practices; and 3) the deflationary role of China in the democratisation process in Africa. While addressing these shortcomings would require significant reforms on both sides, such reforms, if carried out, would contribute significantly to the sustainability of the China-Africa relationship.

China is clear about what it wants from Africa: resource commodities, energy security, market access and international diplomatic support, particularly for its efforts to isolate and reclaim Taiwan. Africa's needs are also clear. Africa needs China as it provides an alternative source of the highly demanded finance for Africa. Its companies deliver fast and cheap goods, services and loans that are impatiently and widely wanted by the

public. In short, Africa needs China as a financier-supplier and deliverer. China's propensity remains to ensure its national interest through economic ties in Africa and its institutions are well prepared for this. The cardinal question is whether Africa is prepared to make the best out of this partnership and the competition between the west and the east. China's dealings in Africa reflect the character of the host states and governments. Chinese companies acclimatise quickly to the system of the partner state; with transparent systems Chinese companies operate in transparency. If faced by a corrupt system, they deal accordingly in a corrupt manner. Indicative of the weak legislative, regulatory and enforcement systems of African countries and their corrupt officials, Chinese and other companies exploit this weakness to their advantage. In this regard, Africans take the lion's share of responsibility for these weaknesses. However, China also shares the blame as it has contributed, albeit with a varying degree, to these weaknesses due to a lack of normative principles and mechanisms for oversight of its dealings in Africa.

Delivery and Democracy

China has aided African governments in meeting the exponentially increasing public demands for services and infrastructure more quickly. China enabled African countries to meet some of the public demands for development particularly in infrastructure such as roads, buildings, bridges, airports, hospitals, schools, universities, and telecommunications. Many people are now used to such quick delivery of services by Chinese companies and it has created, and will continue to create, more of an appetite for Chinese companies in Africa. Moreover, one of the many historical problems that Africa is currently facing and shares is rampant poverty. The non-traditional Chinese development model exudes inspirational messages to many African leaders regardless of whether the development model could be replicated in Africa.

China's unconditional and unqualified cooperation has allowed African governments to enjoy access to finance, expertise and development aid with no political conditions. Incumbent governments in these countries have gained some performance legitimacy. This undermines the efforts of the Western world for almost five decades to change the systems of governance in African countries with aid as a carrot. For many decades, African governments have been at the epicentre of governance and economic problems. Indeed, attributable to bad governance in post-independence African states and incorrect prescriptive policies of dominant powers and global governance institutions, African states are often 'police states' strong only in securing government power. States in Africa are fragile, displaying the weakness and vulnerabilities of entities with limited control of their territories and the means to employ violence. States have become very strong in the wrong functions of the state such as repression, intelligence and surveillance to maintain power. In addition, they have become weak in the delivery of

legitimately expected services such as law and order, peace and security, public utilities and major infrastructural developments.

States are depicted as enemies of their own societies. With various external interferences and other internal causes, the roles of African states have been minimized, and non-state actors, mainly due to international support, offer many of the services that states are supposed to provide. Several western initiatives including the Washington Consensus came to empower CSOs to deliver most of the soft, and in some cases, hard security in the name of private security firms. Done at the expense of states, this led to weak and non-viable states to carry out core state functions that could have given them legitimacy. With this increased legitimacy of non-state actors resulting in a backlash from states and attempts to stifle CSOs in many African countries. China, through its unconventional development path and soft loans, has provided African governments with the possibility of tipping the balance of legitimacy for states at least in the delivery of some public goods. Consequently, China's engagement has also rekindled two kinds of ideological debates on development and the state. The first debate relates to how and why China quickly grew to become the second largest economy in the space of four decades. This constitutes a quest for inspiration and inquiry if the Chinese model of development could help African countries get out of poverty towards development. These quests for inspiration ranges from attempts to emulate to simply show case that poverty eradication and finally development is possible. The second debate refers to the role of the state in the development of a country. What place should African governments and states have in the economic life of the country? Should they be the deliverers of basic economic goods and drivers of economic development strategies or the watchman guarding the rules of economic game?

Inspirational Message from China: The Developmental State

Many Africans are interested in the lessons Africa can learn from the unconventional development of China and the role of the state in this process. In 1978, China began a political strategy to build a dynamic economy. There are three stages to this strategy: doubling GDP in 10 years to feed and clothe the population; redoubling it again in 20 years for prosperity and in 70 years to make China a global modern economy.(8) Now, the per capita income of China has increased fivefold. There are two factors behind such a miraculous growth: 1) capital asset accumulation through high domestic savings, and 2) high productivity of the work force through training, which is in line with the Confucian value of education.(9) Traditionally, the main driving element for economic growth was considered to be capital and free competition among market forces. Under conventional thinking in economics, productivity was never taken as a prime force for economic growth. An average of 4 percent productivity is the highest ever recorded. This is distinctive of China's economic growth. The contribution of productivity to China's exceptional economic growth was the most unparalleled in the history of wealth of

nations. This is untraditional thinking in economic development of the Adam Smith's tradition of the invisible balance of free market forces. How did China grow this fast? Can Chinese growth serve as a blueprint for other countries?

Renowned economists such as Jeffery Sachs and Wing Woo believe it is possible to copy the development roadmap in other countries, whereas others such as Philip Naughton and Ronald Mckinnon believe the opposite. Some further argue, most often correctly, that China developed in very limited democratic space where the 'one child policy' was imposed on the population, the armed forces were used to promote economic development, intellectual property rights were disregarded, and projects that utterly overlooked the rights of minorities and local communities were carried out. Thus, they say that Chinese development cannot be replicated in Africa due to these undemocratic characteristics and other cultural issues. There are many similarities between the pre-1978 China and many African countries including large populations with insufficient food, high levels of illiteracy and agrarian communities. In three decades, China got out of poverty and became the second largest economy.

China's government enjoys performance legitimacy but has limited consensual popular legitimacy. In all this, the state and government played vital roles.

For these reasons, China's fast economic growth inspires many Africans and motivates their leaders to play a similar role. This reinvented role of the state in development has been effectively embraced in the developmental state policy of many African countries. Easy access to soft loans has enabled many African governments to avoid the pressure of global governance institutions to meet norms of accountability and conditionality related to political and economic reforms. Through their work ethic and quick delivery, Chinese companies also infused the sense of urgency in the delivery of services and goods in Africa, helping African governments to think and carry out reforms in their investment policy.(10) But more importantly, it contributed to their performance legitimacy, indirectly increasing the chances of unpopular governments to stay in power. With its prioritisation of stability and development, its developmental state model indirectly depreciates the efforts towards democracy and legitimacy.

The strong economic relations China has with countries and governments openly accused of human rights violations and authoritarian governance such as Sudan, Zimbabwe, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have led to the strong criticism of its regressive tendencies when it comes to human rights and democracy. China is also accused of lacking sufficient concern and initiative to support UNSC Resolutions on Darfur aiming to end the massive human rights violations carried out by all sides. It has repeatedly vetoed any measure by the UN Security Council,(11) and indirectly contributed to the Darfur debacle by maintaining huge oil and arms dealings.(12) "In

countries where relations with the West are problematic, China is benefiting from its policy of non-involvement in internal politics. Its relationship with Sudan, condemned by the United Nations over the situation in Darfur, is emblematic of a strategy untroubled by ethical considerations.”(13) Reports also show that income gained from exports to China has been used for the political gains of ruling parties in countries like Angola.(14) Many of these dictatorial African heads of state and government visit China frequently. Chinese President Hu Jintao visited countries under authoritarian leadership such as Gabon and Sudan.(15) China had significant leverage on both governments of Sudan and Zimbabwe. It is reported that President Hu Jintao has implored the Sudanese president, Omar al-Bashir, to accept the deployment of an African Union-United Nations hybrid force in Darfur.(16) China is actually reported to be behind the resignation of some prominent politicians in Angola.(17)

While many African leaders and politicians may consider China a model for the state-led delivery of public goods and services through its non-traditional inspirational economic growth and its efficient works in Africa, the Asian giant is also indirectly retarding Africa’s progress towards peace and improved human rights in some African countries. In a nutshell, China is economically inspirational for Africa. However, politically, it is deflationary to Africa in terms of its human rights record, democracy and popular legitimacy.

The Dangers of Delivery without Democracy

The North African popular protests employed different methods, but their message remains the same: people will revolt in countries where governments do not respect the will of the people, and governments must have widespread legitimacy or else they will continue to face such protests. More importantly, governments increasingly understand that they need legitimacy because the use of sheer force is a very risky endeavour. No matter how much a dictator manipulates a governance system or intimidates the public by brute force, unforeseen circumstances and accumulated grievances may lead to a situation where public protest reaches a point of no return. Time is of the essence at this point. Plans for manipulation and intimidation will not necessarily dictate what kind of events trigger revolution, which in turn, cannot be subject to the influence and power of individuals. The long-term trend is that a tyrannical style of governance will be met with internationally supported popular protests.

As revealed in the North African uprisings, people in many African countries have demanded both democracy and delivery, and the power to ensure their freedom to deliberate and decide how their countries should be run. The implications of the North African uprisings indicate that the pillars upon which stability thrives are not limited to performance legitimacy in which governments act like the UNDP trying to improve their delivery of services and goods, but also include popular legitimacy through democracy.

The Chinese investment and development model may have encouraged African governments, including those toppled by revolutions like those of Tunisia and Egypt, to become “UNDP-like governments” who amass their power from their success in delivering goods and services. Political vision and freedom for the population in addition to the construction of infrastructure, expansion of education and health and agricultural extension programmes equally determine the mandate to rule a given population. For stability and economic reform to thrive, it needs to be supported by political reform. Indeed, the revolutions of North Africa reveal that the mandate of a government to rule depends on the popular legitimacy the government possesses in the form of continued majority consent. In fact, a government with popular legitimacy faces less protest than one with only performance legitimacy. Toleration of various performance weaknesses of a government and inequalities in a society increases under a popular government elected democratically.

At the same time, an elected popular government that does not meet its election promises faces performance deficit and loses its popularity with time. In contrast, a high performing government with limited popular legitimacy due to its limited political support may, in time, expand its political base and achieve popular legitimacy. Consequently, public protests arise due to demands for both democracy and delivery. In this case, Africans bear the primary responsibility for human rights violations and bad governance in their countries.

Conclusions: The Way Forward

Africa needs China’s delivery of easy soft loans, quick services and cheap goods. In return, it provides China with relatively untapped markets, huge natural resources and energy security. Africa and China also need each other for mutual support in global diplomacy, including the reform of the United Nations and the United Nations Security Council. Through BRICSA, China could support the AU’s effort at the international level. Also, such support would bring about diplomatic backing from most of the AU’s 54 member countries. China’s partnership would continue to grow as Africans increasingly replaced aid with trade.

North African countries were considered by many development partners as insulated from disturbances of the kind many sub-Saharan countries are now facing. Development partners measured the performance of these countries through statistics in the development index, economic growth or the Doing Business index. Foreign policies of major global powers such as the United States and China were also dictated by the improvement of livelihood through delivery rather than democracy. Nevertheless, Africa needs democracy.

Thus, China has to encourage the legitimacy of the exercise of power by its partner governments in Africa. Only in this manner can it hope to lay the foundation for a

sustainable partnership in Africa. China's standing on the global arena gradually depends on the integrity of its dealings and the credibility of the governments dealing with it. China's engagement with Africa will increasingly face requests to integrate its standing on human security and democracy with its economic partnership. It ignores such pressure only when it poses serious risks to its interests in Africa. Future generations and newly elected governments such as in Zambia and Senegal may judge China not only on economic achievements but also on the political front. Consequently, China, like other African partners, needs to examine its policy of engagement in Africa, not only for the sake of Africa, but also for its own interests. Such introspective investigation would help China revise its assumptions and enable it to design new approaches. Accordingly, it should infuse conditionality in the partnership to encourage democracy and support human rights.

But does China have the capacity to influence politics in Africa? Yes. Does China have the internal orientation or willingness to influence the political systems in Africa immediately? Probably not.

China is famously pragmatic. The practically miraculous economic achievement is a result of experience and progressive appreciation of the forces at play both inside and outside of the country. Chinese pragmatism is summarised by Deng Xiaoping, a former leader and transformer of China's economy, who reportedly said, "It does not matter if a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice." Chinese companies swiftly adapt to the circumstances of host countries. So far, there is no case where China rejected demands of partnering countries for change in their dealings. Unlike western countries, which demand that Africa aligns its plans and priorities to their conditions, China has aligned with the priorities and development plans of African countries instead of imposing its own. It is unlikely that China would try to impose its will on an African country or turn down a request to negotiate the terms of partnership. Accordingly, re-negotiation of the existing partnerships to address the above-mentioned negative aspects should be possible. Chinese capability of carrying out these reforms resides in its pragmatist approach. In many countries that faced political crises such as Somalia, South Sudan, the Republic of Sudan and Libya, China gradually followed the tide of the international community. It mostly reflected its interest to secure and continue economic cooperation with those countries without initiating changes.

Clearly, China could not be the champion of human rights in Africa and the most serious binding constraint in this regard is the human rights record of China itself. But on both sides, democracy will be increasingly demanded by the younger and future generations. This does not mean China needs to adopt the West's prescriptive and sometimes arrogant approach toward Africa and African democracy. It just needs to engage more

subtly with the countries that it deals with. Both could support each other in their efforts towards democratisation.

As in the economic front, China's foreign policy on other fronts such as peace and security as well as its position on African domestic politics need to be revisited. Its foreign policy toward Africa needs to be dictated by norms jointly set by it and the AU together. The AU needs to initiate this discussion and FOCAC could serve as an excellent entry point to address this normative problem in the partnership. The AU should engage Chinese policy makers to consider focusing on establishing political will from both sides. Demands for a stronger political stance by China on the governance track record of many African governments need to be included in the governing principles of FOCAC. Through FOCAC, China could also support the efforts of the AU technically in the implementation of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the African Governance Architecture (AGA) towards peaceful, democratic and human rights protective regimes in Africa. Using the AU as an entry point as a multilateral platform for setting common standards and normative guidelines and supervision, China would be insulated from the accusation of interference in the domestic of affairs of African countries, while at the same time, this approach would also mitigate attacks on China's reputation at the global level as a spoiler of opportunities for peace in Africa.

Moreover, the China-Africa partnership has huge opportunities to learn from the failures and successes of others partnerships such as that of Africa and the EU. The question should be how to move the debate to new frontiers and ensure maximum benefits for Africa in the context of "mutual benefit." China should continue to align its support for African countries in their areas of priority. China needs to continue capacitating African states to deliver. At the same time, it should also encourage African countries through various means to be responsive to public demands in political affairs. For now and quite some time in the future, para-statal enterprises can be expected to drive the foreign policy of China. The starting point could be to revisit the role of Chinese business companies in formulating the foreign policy of China toward Africa. Even if many of these companies are state owned, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs could be more sensitive and responsive to standards and norms of operation in Africa. The Chinese government should retake that role. The ministry needs to play an increasingly critical role in how these enterprises and China's international relations are conducted.

While policies at the AU level will be important in setting the overall guiding normative framework for engagement, bilateral cooperation will still need to be governed by national policies toward development priorities and investment. African countries could have benefited more from China's partnership if they had strong regulatory and enforcement mechanisms as well as policies determining how to negotiate with China. The ultimate responsibility of designing the adequate legislative and regulatory policies

and building effective enforcement mechanisms rests on the Africans. They are the final beneficiaries of reform of these kinds. Overhauling the legislative, regulatory and enforcement framework of African countries could be overwhelming. Incremental reform may offer the necessary time to reflect and effect changes.

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