Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

Creating a More Mature and Efficient Platform

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The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is an important platform for dialogue and cooperation between China and Africa, and has played an important role in leading and promoting Sino-African relations. China and Africa have witnessed a rapid development of the FOCAC over the past 12 years. This Sino-African forum is now entering into a new period of development,[1] and will face new challenges and opportunities. The FOCAC needs more strategic planning to make itself a more mature and efficient platform and to accelerate the development of a new type of China-Africa strategic partnership. The upcoming 5th Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation will therefore be an important event.

A New Context for the FOCAC

The background against which FOCAC has successfully developed in its first 12 years has undergone significant changes, which can be grouped into three main categories. These changes will affect the future development of the FOCAC as follows.

● Transformation of Sino-African relations

   China was a negligible economic partner for Africa 12 years ago, but it is now her leading trading partner and one of the most important sources of investment and development aid to Africa. When the FOCAC was formally established in the year 2000, the trade volume between China and Africa was only US$10 billion. China surpassed the US as Africa’s biggest trading partner in 2009. In 2011 the trade volume between China and Africa reached US$160 billion, and China’s accumulated investments in Africa were more than US$40 billion. More than 2,000 Chinese enterprises have now invested in Africa.[2] According to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, China has contributed about 20% of Africa’s economic growth during this period. Making the most of these economic opportunities provided by China is now a key issue in Africa. Many Africans believe that Africa can only realize its development potential with China’s help.[3]

   China played a limited role in Africa 12 years ago, but it is now considered one of the most important international players in Africa. After the Cold War, Africa was for many years a “forgotten continent” in the West. The FOCAC has been one of the driving forces
in bringing the international community to pay more attention to Africa. The FOCAC Summit in Beijing in 2006 was one of the milestones in the development of Sino-African relations. The Summit gathered many African heads of state and leaders of government, and began to draw the attention of the international community to the FOCAC and developing Sino-African relations for the first time. In many sensitive areas such as Darfur, Zimbabwe, Cote d’Ivoire, and Libya, China’s attitudes have sometimes made the Western countries reconsider their excessively interventionist policies, and have allowed more room to the African countries to formulate their own attitudes and positions on these issues.

China’s soft power influence is still very limited in Africa, and the Western countries are far more influential, but this is slowly changing. After the global financial crisis, Africans have become suspicious of the West’s values, political system, and economic development model, and are reconsidering their options. China’s economic achievements in the last 30 years have impressed Africa. It is becoming more popular among Africans to study in Confucius Institutes and learn Chinese. More African business people are coming to China in search of economic opportunities. African politicians and civil servants are coming to China to learn about the Chinese experience of economic growth. For example, the African National Congress, the ruling party in South Africa, has regularly sent members of its national executive to China to learn from the Chinese experience.

- **Transformation of the FOCAC itself**

The FOCAC’s mechanism has evolved, as many different platforms have been established under its framework, in addition to the four Ministerial Conferences so far held and the one Summit. These platforms include the Sino-African Education Ministers’ Forum, the China-Africa Forum on Agricultural Cooperation, the FOCAC Legal Forum, the China-Africa People’s Forum, the China Africa Industrial Forum, the China-Africa Young Leaders Forum, and the China-Africa Think Tanks Forum. Many other programs and activities have also been established to strengthen Sino-African relations, such as the China-Africa Youth Festival, the China-Africa Science and Technology Partnership Program, the China-Africa Joint Research and Exchange Program, the 20+20 Cooperation Plan of Chinese and African Institutions of Higher Learning, and African Culture in Focus and Chinese Culture in Focus.

A second important change has been the increase in the number of actors. In addition to governmental bodies, civil society organizations, NGOs, enterprises, scholars, and the media are all playing an active role in the FOCAC. Different actors have different and sometimes conflicting interests and expectations of the development of the FOCAC.
The FOCAC now possesses greater financial resources and other means to achieve its goals. The accumulated volume of Chinese aid to Africa was less than 50 billion yuan in 2006, but had increased to 76 billion yuan by 2009.\[4\] Measures undertaken within the framework of the FOCAC, such as debt cancellation, human resources cooperation, construction of schools and hospitals, and the establishment of trade and economic cooperation zones have benefited Africa and improved Sino-African relations.

- **Transformation of international environment**

As Sino-African relations have become more important, other players in Africa, especially the Western countries are seeking to become more active in Africa. Thanks to the FOCAC, Sino-African relations are no longer confined to the bilateral level, and can have a significant impact on third parties. China’s policy and its activities in Africa are attracting much more attention from the Western countries and the rest of the international community, and often become a reason for them to adjust their African policy. Both traditional powers and newly rising powers have either strengthened or created platforms to improve their relations with Africa. They are also seeking to influence the development of the FOCAC.\[5\]

New international principles and initiatives are also affecting the FOCAC, such as the Responsibility to Protect, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), the Equator Principle, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). At the same time, the principles practiced by the FOCAC, such as “political equality and mutual trust, economic win-win cooperation, and cultural exchange” and “friendship, peace, cooperation and development” have become better known around the world. For example, China’s aid policy was discussed by the international development community in the 2009 conference in Accra, Ghana, and the 2011 conference in Busan, South Korea. Africa is becoming an important testing ground for many new international principles and initiatives.

**New Challenges**

Because of this changing context, the FOCAC will face new challenges in the future.

- **Challenges from changing Sino-African relations**

Upgrading Sino-African economic relations is one major challenge. Although Africa and China have both benefited from the development of their economic relationship, Africa is still in a relatively weak position. Africans have begun to raise concerns about achieving more balanced trade between China and Africa, and about African capacity building. The FOCAC is expected to encourage more Chinese foreign direct investment, more transfer of
technological skills and knowledge to Africa, and greater cooperation between China and Africa in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors.

Sino-African political relations face challenges from the changing domestic and international context. China’s solidarity with the third world and its support for anti-colonialist national liberation movements laid a solid foundation for friendly relations between China and Africa. Although these kinds of ties still exist, they have grown much weaker. After half a century of struggle for national liberation, Africa has now emerged into a period of ‘African renaissance.’ China has also moved from a period of war and revolution into the period of peace and development. In this new context there is a need for the FOCAC to lay down new foundations to consolidate Sino-African friendship.

There is also a need to expand the involvement of civil society organizations, NGOs, the media etc. in the FOCAC’s activities and programs, to increase grassroots participation and support. Only a limited number of ordinary Chinese and Africans were involved in Sino-African relations 12 years ago. Now there are many more Chinese in Africa and many more Africans in China. The Sino-African relationship is no longer confined to contact between the ruling elites, but has become a relationship between peoples. However, there has been a lack of mutual understanding between ordinary Chinese and Africans because of the paucity of historical links between China and Africa. There is thus an urgent need for the FOCAC to promote better understanding between the two peoples by increasing grassroots involvement in its activities.

- **Challenges from the transformation of the FOCAC itself**

The FOCAC now faces a major challenge in the coordination of its activities. As the Forum has created new dialogue and cooperation platforms, multiplied its cooperation programs and projects, and increased its aid budgets, its administrative demands have become far more complex. Numerous Chinese Ministries and agencies are now involved in FOCAC follow-up actions, and coordination between these various actors can sometimes be quite a difficult problem. Coordination on the African side is also problematic. It is difficult for Africa to harmonize ideas and proposals from its different constituent countries. Elements of action plans agreed by the Ministerial Conferences of the FOCAC sometimes have to be based mainly on the Chinese proposals because of a lack of consensus among the African countries.[6] There is still much room for improvement in achieving effective coordination between the FOCAC’s initiatives and Africa’s actual needs. There have been complaints that some of the FOCAC’s measures have failed to take adequate consideration of Africa’s own strategic planning, and that they have not aligned very closely with the development programs of African countries and regional organizations.
A further challenge is to develop a more balanced Sino-African relationship. Against the background of the rapid development in economic relations, the inadequacy of Sino-African cooperation in certain areas is becoming more evident. Peace and security cooperation is one of these areas. The FOCAC needs to encourage more consular cooperation in order to better protect Chinese citizens in Africa and Africans in China. There have been appeals to the Chinese government to contribute more to Africa’s peace and security in order to protect Chinese interests in Africa. The other area often mentioned is multilateral cooperation between China and Africa. Bilateral programs and projects have so far dominated the cooperations supported by the FOCAC. As Africa accelerates its regional integration, and more transnational and trans-regional plans and programs have been put forward by African Union and other regional organizations, there is a need for the FOCAC to strengthen multilateral cooperation between China and Africa.

● Challenges from the changing international context

In recent years, China has been approached by France, Japan, the UK, the USA, the EU and others about possible trilateral cooperations with Africa. China has already begun dialogues with such traditional donors about trilateral cooperation, but a practical means of cooperation has yet to be found. China is more likely to cooperate with other emerging powers in helping Africa, acting on a basis of respecting Africans’ opinions and continuing the good practices developed under the FOCAC. A major problem is the lack of platforms for dialogue and cooperation, and a weakness of political will among the newly rising powers. Determining the best kind of relationship between the FOCAC and international non-state actors is another challenge. More Western NGOs, enterprises, and media are seeking to influence the development of the FOCAC for various purposes. These non-governmental actors are often prone to misunderstandings about the FOCAC because of the present lack of suitable communication and cooperation channels.

The FOCAC needs to improve theoretical thinking to better adapt to the new international environment. China and Africa have together established many good principles and policies, such as “political equality and mutual trust, economic win-win, cooperation and cultural exchange.” However, the new international context has raised new challenges in areas such as sovereignty theory and its related non-interference policy. In the future more such issues will require the FOCAC to renew its interpretations of some of its existing principles and lay down new principles to meet the new situation.[7]

The Path to a More Productive Cooperation Forum
As new problems and challenges are appearing in this new period of its development, the FOCAC needs to explore new methods and new thinking in order to maintain a sustainable development and further promote Sino-African relations.

1) The FOCAC needs better strategic thinking and planning to make itself a more mature and efficient platform for China-Africa cooperation. The most important task it is now facing is to lead the Sino-African relationship from extensive to intensive development. It must focus not only on the quantity but also the quality of the development of Sino-Africa relations in another dozen years.

2) The FOCAC needs to improve its practical cooperation. The FOCAC needs to take measures not only to expand the scale of Sino-African trade, but also to optimize the trade structure. It will need to make more efforts to promote the export of African goods to China, to facilitate Chinese investment and technology transfer to Africa, to provide more job opportunities for the African people, and to enhance African countries’ capacity building.

3) The FOCAC needs to further its institution building and improve its mechanisms. Besides the Ministerial Conferences, the FOCAC could also consider holding a Summit meeting every 12 years. It especially needs to strengthen dialogue and cooperation in fields such as agriculture, health, security and infrastructure. For example, China and Africa could set up a crisis management mechanism under the framework of the FOCAC to address potential conflicts in Africa and to improve consular cooperation to protect Chinese citizens in Africa and Africans in China. There is also a need to encourage the African members of the FOCAC play a more active role, and to align its actions more closely with the development plans of African countries and regional organizations, such as the NEPAD (New Partnership for African Development). The FOCAC could also consider more projects and programs which surpass the 3-year timeframe of the Ministerial Conferences so that it can play a more important role in some of Africa’s large-scale infrastructure programs such as transnational road and railway projects. Both Chinese and Africans need to be made more aware of issues regarding the environment, social responsibility, and the sustainability of their development. The FOCAC should also strengthen the supervision and evaluation of its programs to increase their effectiveness.

4) The FOCAC needs to pay more attention to improving mutual understanding of the Chinese and African peoples. The two peoples often look at each other through the deformed lens of the Western media, leading to misunderstanding and mistrust. The Chinese media need to increase their coverage of Africa, and the African media their coverage of China, to counteract this. The FOCAC should provide more opportunities for Chinese and Africans to share each other’s development experience, discuss their differences of opinion, and discover more common ground. More discussions between
Chinese and Africans about the Chinese experience of development (the “Beijing consensus”), the “Washington consensus,” and Africa’s own ideas on development will be helpful in finding a more appropriate and sustainable path of development. Besides the official dialogues, the FOCAC should create more opportunities for civil society organizations such as NGOs to participate in its activities and programs, while more cultural and people-to-people exchanges will be conducive to deepening the traditional Sino-African friendship.

5) The FOCAC needs to do more to promote South-North cooperation and South-South cooperation, and so create a more favorable international environment. Competition between China and the Western countries to increase trade with Africa and to increase aid and investment is beneficial for Africa, but cooperation would be even better. The FOCAC needs to find more effective ways to cooperate with UN organizations, the Western countries, and emerging powers on issues relating to Africa. Some scholars suggest that the FOCAC should invite the Western countries and other players in Africa to be observers at the next FOCAC Ministerial Conference, although neither China nor the African countries are yet ready to allow this. The FOCAC needs to engage more in trilateral cooperation by allowing other players in Africa to participate in some of its programs and activities, and encouraging its members to join in some of the trilateral cooperation programs and projects being proposed by traditional donors. Sino-African relations are entering a new period of development, which will require the FOCAC to take a more strategic view of its evolving role.

China and Africa should have closer dialogue and consultation within the FOCAC framework, enhance their coordination and cooperation on global issues of mutual interest, strive to increase the voices and representation of developing countries in the international system, and ensure better development for both China and Africa.

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[1] According to the Chinese calendar, there are 12 years in one dizhi (地支), with a different animal representing each year of the period. The Sino-African forum was formally established in the Year of Dragon (in 2000), and the Fifth Ministerial Conference of the FOCAC will be held in Beijing in another Year of Dragon (in 2012).


