

FOCAC AS A GEOPOLITICAL PLATFORM



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A number of examples and instances of FOCAC as a geopolitical platform can be delineated. For starters, FOCAC has a strong element of international politics that brings Africa and China together in a way that lends it to diplomacy generally and public diplomacy specifically – in other words geopolitics.

For instance, Alden (2007:27) notes that FOCAC ‘is folded into a very public regional diplomacy setting’. Shelton and Paruk comment that ‘the FOCAC process may defined as a form of international collaboration through which compatible interests and objectives are investigated, aggregated and strengthened’. Gazibo and Mbabia (2012:52) reckon FOCAC as ‘a multilateral group aiming not only to balance American primacy but also to build an [internationally recognizable] identity’.

It is reported for instance that former Chinese president Hu Jintao touched on ‘the theme of South-South co-operation in the context of

globalization and advancing technologies’ during the 2006 FOCAC in Beijing (CCS 2010:6). So desirous of the south-south framing of the Africa-China relations within the FOCAC framework are African nations that the AU created a south-south cooperation (SSC) high level commission (Shelton and Paruk 2008:5). South-south cooperation is framed in the FOCAC arrangement in such a way that it stands in contrast of and opposition to the “rich north” (i.e. the US and Europe). Gazibo and Mbabia’s (2012) thesis is that the underlying factor for the south-south or developing nation cooperation of Africa and China under FOCAC is to oppose unilateralism, particularly US unilateralism.

Togolese president Faure Essozima Gnassingbé was quoted as saying that: ‘in building a fairer world for our people, China is a front runner’ (CCS 2010:13). This statement can be interpreted as confirmation that China has achieved Mao Zedong’s ambitions for China as the leader of the third

FOCAC SERIES
NOVEMBER 2015

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world, without shouting too much about such a status. Former president Hu Jintao’s promulgation of his ‘harmonious world’ leadership philosophy extends Mao’s “global south” objectives of the 1960s thus:

‘As the world’s largest developing country, China should take the lead among developing countries, pro-actively develop economic and trade cooperation and friendly exchanges with developing countries, and strive to build harmonious partnerships’ (Shelton and Paruk 2008:13).

Against the background of China’s intent to craft a south-south solidarity narrative, African leaders have not disappointed. A former Tanzanian foreign affairs minister was in praise of FOCAC as a ‘model for south-south cooperation’ underpinned by ‘equal participation in decision making’ (CCS 2010:13). It would therefore appear that from FOCAC being modeled on south-south cooperation, it has become a model for south-south

cooperation. Former Botswana president characterized FOCAC as an ‘ideal forum’ (CCS 2010:14). For Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni, China as ‘a model and inspiration to other developing countries’ is founded on its ‘remarkable economic success and progress’ (CCS 2010:14). Renown Western-world economist Jeffrey Sachs viewed China as Africa’s role model because ‘its own recent experience in transformation’ (CCS 2010:15). Referring to these ‘presidential’ sentiments as ‘swooning’ Alden (2007:35) concludes that ‘the positive reaction from African governments ... is testimony to the effectiveness of this Chinese foreign policy approach’. Gazibo and Mbabia (2012) however worry that relations might end up top-heavy with elite interests to the detriment of general African populaces.

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The essence of the wide and positive reception of FOCAC by African leaders is captured in Gazibo and Mbabia's view that the coming together or grouping of 'small African countries' (where most if not all African countries fall on a global scale) with an increasingly strong and globally assertive China has a benefit for both. It would allow African countries to have a voice on the world stage, a platform that is supposedly denied them in the current international architecture (Gazibo and Mbabia 2012:67).

The CCS report goes further to point out that 'China and Africa are seeking a stronger voice for the developing world on the global stage and in international institutions such as the UN, WTO, IMF and World Bank' (CCS 2010:6; see also Shelton and Paruk 2008:4). This international institutional dimension of FOCAC is seen as a bid to democratize international institutions (Shelton and Paruk 2008:4; Gazibo and Mbabia 2012:61), which in turn suggests that they are currently skewed against the

interests of developing nations. In the same vein, China and Africa (generally speaking) have supported each other at the UN over the years and of especial significance is on matters relating to alleged human rights abuses and anti-democratic practices, consultations on trade and economic issues in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in the United Nations Security Council, at the World Health Organization, at the UN Human Rights Commission ... in a nutshell, there is Africa-China quid pro quo internationally (Alden 2007:22; Gazibo and Mbabia 2012:61; Li et al. 2012:13).

Beyond the north-south divide and other geopolitical dimensions of FOCAC, the mechanism does also include and involve other supra-national organizations. An example among many others would be China's financial and technical support for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) on food security matters.

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Africa and China have not only pledged to support each other's causes on the international stage, but are doing so under the FOCAC framework. It has also been acknowledged that the FOCAC process contributes to the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) initiative which sets targets on matters such as health, poverty/wealth, sanitation, education and other human development issues for the developing world. FOCAC documents suggest that it is calibrated as a framework just any number of international activities. It is through FOCAC for instance that China channels assistance to Africa through the NEPAD and negotiates on matters to do with the WTO.

There is a measure of ambiguity in the fact that FOCAC is a bilateral entity wrapped in a multilateral formation, and vice versa. This ambiguity is shared in FOCAC's apparent ambivalence as to the support of and indeed involvement of UN agencies while at the same time pushing for reforms in the international

multilateral agencies. In other words, FOCAC can be seen as both a compliment and supporter of UN agencies such as UNDP, FAO, UNEP and others with which it cooperates in matters to do with Africa, but at the same time, it is seen as opposed to certain elements of the UN system for instance the composition of the United Nations Security Council in which Beijing is seen as pushing for better representation of Africa (see Gazibo and Mbabia 2012:61). This further brings to the fore the question of multilateralism and bilateralism in the Africa-China relations at the global level as much as this is also a question at the inter-region (Africa and China) level. Further duality on the part of China can be seen in the sense that China's economic (the second largest economy in the world) and political (permanent member of the United Nations Security Council member, nuclear power) assets would place it among great powers, yet it chooses to categorize itself among developing nations (Gazibo and Mbabia 2012:64).

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Gazibo and Mbabia are of the view that the invocation of China as a developing country draws not just on a history of collaboration, but seeks to reassure Africans, thus, FOCAC is a vehicle to restore confidence in Africans just in case they imagine a China that has become a global power will abandon them.

Furthermore, and again on a global scale, China frames its relations with Africa as special in that they are ‘a new type of strategic partnership’, same as the linguistic rendering of Chinese relations with Arab countries and not too different at least in terms of phraseology with the crafting of China-US relations as ‘a new type of relationship between major countries’ (see Lampton 2013). Significant for the current paper is that these dualities and ambivalences play out in the FOCAC mechanism.

An interesting point worth noting is that the official Chinese conception of geopolitics, embraces globalization not holistically but only as far as its economic dimensions go, bereft of political and cultural dimensions

(Chakravarty and Zhao 2008:4). This is indeed evident in Li et al (2012) FOCAC study in which reference is made to China’s commitment to ‘economic globalization’ with the ‘economic’ prefix being a prominent marker of the extent to which Chinese officials are willing to embrace ‘globalization’. (2012). Chakravarty and Zhao’s (2008) argue that the Chinese state’s emphasis on economic globalization without cultural globalization implies its intent on ‘integrating with the global market system on the one hand (while) resisting political and cultural assimilation’. Does this cogent observation apply to Africa-China relations? It would appear not, if one considers the suit of cultural projects tending more from China towards Africa than from Africa towards China.

In analyzing the geopolitical dimensions of FOCAC, the mechanism can be reduced to being an international relations strategy for China and Africa.

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Gazibo and Mbabia (2012:53) enumerate some of the rubrics of the strategy as: attempts by China and Africa, considered weak in the international system, to balance out stronger states; a means of fending off ‘security threats from the hegemonic power’; banding together so as to deter the tendency of strong states to steamroll over weak states, among other strategic considerations.

FOCAC as a bilateral and multilateral entity

FOCAC bears the ambiguity and ‘complication’ of being a multilateral organization bringing together China and Africa while at the same time being a broad framework within which China engages individual African countries bilaterally (Alden 2007:27). CCS (2010:16; Gazibo and Mbabia 2012:59) report that China reached agreements with African Union (AU) and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) at the successive conferences between 2000 and 2006 and initiated a strategic dialogue with the AU Commission in 2008. Indeed, Li et.al (2012:12) point

out that NEPAD is the technical arm in AU’s engagements with China under FOCAC. In pointing out the deep symbolism of China’s construction of the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa in 2012, Gazibo and Mbabia (2012:59) imply that this is an example on which China’s commitment to Pan-Africanism is beyond reproach. In addition, China has agreements with Africa’s regional economic communities such as the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). Indeed, Alden (2007:32) argues that ‘the Chinese government has ... worked to incorporate (the AU) into the formation of FOCAC and in terms of substantive actions such as funding NEPAD projects or a new AU building’.

What we learn here is that it would be feasible to talk of Africa-China bilateral relations if Africa approached the relations as one indivisible entity, but this is not the case.

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Indeed, it is possible to talk of China-Arab relations as bilateral engagements because the 17 Arabic nations all fall under the umbrella of the Arab League in so far as the China Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) is calibrated.

Having noted tangible examples of China's engagement with Africa multilaterally, we can proceed to point out that FOCAC projects are mostly undertaken under the bilateral arrangement between China and say Kenya, Nigeria or South Africa. Li et.al (2012:31) characterize the 'multilateral and bilateral, centralized (Chinese) and decentralized (African)' conundrum of FOCAC as a reflection [of] the essentials of Africa-China relations, with one country on one side and continent with 54 countries on the other'. In other words FOCAC is a multilateral mechanism whose outputs are delivered at the bilateral level (Alden 2007:27; Li et.al 2012:33). Gazibo and Mbabia (2012:70) assert that 'China paradoxically appreciates' bilateral negotiations rather than multilateral approaches, a paradox

indeed because China has demonstrated commitment to certain Pan-African projects. Shelton and Paruk (2008:18) conceive of FOCAC as a 'quasi-institutionalized collaborative mechanism', a conception that can be interpreted to mean that while broad agreements are negotiated and endorsed multilaterally, tangible implementation is the preserve of China and respective African counties. In suggesting that China is not anathema to dual-track multilateral and bilateral approach to Africa, Gazibo and Mbabia (2012:51) state that: 'multilateralism [was] once regarded with suspicion ... [by China but it has] ended up adopting [multilateralism] to the point of making it an essential element of its "grand diplomatic strategy"'. They still put higher premium on the bilateral engagements embedded in FOCAC's multilateralism, going as far as to assert that 'bilateral relations are at the core of [FOCAC] relations between China and Africa' (Gazibo and Mbabia 2012:51).

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Alden (2007) further sees a contradiction in FOCAC promoting African regionalism while China is persistent in the use of bilateral channels to conduct its serious policy initiatives. Interpreted, this would mean that FOCAC is a continental strategy for China's engagement individual African countries. CCS (2010:16) points out that, 'FOCAC [triennial conferences] are largely formalities, setting the tone for future collaborative agreements ... [with] the de facto development of African countries' relations ... (taking) place in the ongoing bilateral dialogue ... in each African country'. It is for such reasons that proposals for the use of AU and/or African regional economic communities as coordinating agencies for FOCAC projects as suggested by Li et.al (2012:49, 51) would be difficult to implement.

There have been suggestions, for instance by South Africa, that FOCAC would better serve the continent's needs if its implementation was approached from a continental rather than country-by-country basis (Shelton

and Paruk 2008:5). This view is often broadened to urge China to invest in cross-continental projects especially roads and railways given the poor connectivity between African nations. By extension, it's often suggested that if China took an approach of assisting in the building of roads, railways and ports across African countries, it would assuage itself of the neo-colonial charge as European colonial powers are seen to have failed in these infrastructural terms. However, it is said that 'most African states are satisfied with [or in favor of] a bilateral interaction' (CCS 2010:6, Shelton and Paruk 2008:5). Indeed the view that the African Union should be the entity that engages with China on FOCAC matters has been broached. CCS (2010:177) lobbies for placing equal importance on the multilateral and bilateral or continental and regional levels.

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The proposal is that while ‘it is up to African governments to maximize the benefits of China’s involvement’ there is need for involvement of the ‘AU (in) prioritization of areas where China’s assistance is needed’ (CCS 2010:177).

Also mentioned is the need for ‘increased symmetry between FOCAC and NEPAD’, among a litany of recommendations from above-board project tendering procedures to local procurement. The call for collaboration between FOCAC and NEPAD is particularly interesting because China and the NEPAD secretariat signed a memorandum of understanding (Shelton and Paruk 2008:7). Would it be that this memorandum has fallen prey to FOCAC’s ambivalence between bilateralism and multilateralism?

On the whole, FOCAC comes across as having both multilateral and bilateral dimensions, although scholars tend to reach consensus that the bilateral end of the spectrum is stronger than the multilateral end of things. Again, it appears that scholars

would generally prefer FOCAC as a multilateral, AU-level entity, but the sobering reality is that the sovereignty of each African country militates against this good.

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SPECIAL REPORT
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The principal investigator of this research report is Bob Wekesa, a post doctoral fellow at the Department of Journalism (Wits Journalism), University of the Witwatersrand. The report received overall leadership from Professor Anton Harber, head of Wits Journalism. Brigitte Read, former coordinator at Wits China Africa Reporting Project managed the initial phases of the study, a role that was taken over by Barry van Wyk, the current Project coordinator. The report benefitted from research assistance by Raymond Mpubani and Emeka Umejei, master’s and doctoral students respectively at Wits Journalism. The entire Wits Journalism Department and Wits University at large contributed to the successful completion of this report. Specifically, Pierre and Linda, administrative officers at Wits Journalism were instrumental in the production of this report.

Wits China Africa Reporting Project would like to thank FAHAMU for the

grant that made this work possible. We would like to particularly thank Sanusha Naidu and Edwin Ruigi, colleagues from Fahamu’s Emerging Powers in Africa for continuous engagement throughout the research and report writing phases of the study.

We would also like to thank Eric Orlander of the China Africa Project podcast for reviewing and offering candid and helpful comments that served to improve the study.

Report designed by Roy Kithinji.

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