The Wits China Africa Reporting Project was granted funds by Fahamu – Networks for Social Justice to undertake a study on FOCAC for the benefit of journalists and civil society organizations. In the first installment, we reviewed Fahamu’s Emerging Powers efforts at fostering knowledgeable responses by civil society toward Africa-China engagements. In this piece, we review FOCAC conferences for the period 2000 to 2009, focusing on key issues and searching for media and civil society perspectives.

The first FOCAC conference (2000)

Clarity in the Africa-China relations generally and China’s policy towards Africa specifically took shape from October 2000 when the inaugural FOCAC ministerial meeting (hereafter referred to as conference¹) was held in Beijing. Chinese leaders, former presidents Jiang Zemin, then vice president Hu Jintao and premier Zhu Rongji praised the event as: “the first (gathering) of its kind in the history of China-Africa relations”, at the dawn of the new century. For an inaugural meeting, the African side had an appreciable showing: president Gnasinbe Eyadema (now deceased) of the Republic of Togo, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of the Democratic People's Republic of Algeria, President Frederic Chiluba (now deceased) of the Republic of Zambia, President Benjamin William Mkapa (since retired) of the United Republic of Tanzania and then secretary-general of the Organization of African Unity (transformed to African Union on 2001) Dr Salim Ahmed Salim.

Indeed, the “Beijing Declaration” that resulted from this inaugural conference is the one that created FOCAC. Both the African and Chinese sides pledged to engage within the FOCAC framework for ‘dialogue on the basis of equality and mutual benefit and to seek peace and development with common objectives.’

¹ For a summary of key FOCAC commitments from 2000 to 2009 see Li et.al. 2012:17-19
² Wekesa (2014:1) points out that the word ‘forum’ in the Forum on China Africa Cooperation belies the fact that this is a holistic multilevel phenomenon. Equally, while the event is dubbed an ‘FOCAC ministerial meeting’ it is really an international conference
The altruistic and pragmatic factors for which FOCAC was established aside, an independent analysis of it reveals the underlying reasons informing its formation. For starters, FOCAC came into being in 2000 smack on the turn of the millennium. The term “globalization” (which is mentioned repeatedly in FOCAC documents) was omnipresent at this point in time with some suggesting the principle behind it was a replacement of the Cold War geopolitics. FOCAC can thus be seen as China’s (and secondarily Africa’s) response to the tectonic changes in the world – real and anticipated.

Away from the interests of Africa and China, the inaugural conference lamented the ‘huge gap between the rich North and the poor South’ and critiqued ‘the heavy debt burden that (had) impeded the development efforts of African countries and impoverished their economies’. In these sentiments, we see two intentions: 1) the privileged position of the Western world (which is ostensibly responsible for Africa’s debt burden and, 2) the coming together of the global south (China and Africa).

A closely related international politics issue was the complaint about ‘the injustice and inequality in the international system’ incompatible with the trends of the times. On this score, the inaugural FOCAC proposed lobbying for Africa to get a permanent United Nations Security Council (UNSC) seat as well as other supranational economic and financial institutions. This is an agenda that traverses the rest of FOCAC conferences and one that largely remains unfinished business fifteen years on.

With the understanding that overseas development assistance from the West to Africa was declining, it came across that China was willing to offer support under ‘a new type of development model’, emphasizing ‘practical results’.

Thus, the inauguration of FOCAC based on a reading of its constitutive documents indicates that pragmatic – mostly economic and developmental motivations – would go hand in hand with geopolitical interests.

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3 For instance this is the core thesis of Thomas Friedman’s popular book, The World is Flat, published in 2005
The second FOCAC conference (2003)

If the inaugural FOCAC seemed to test the waters, the second event, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in December 2003 bore confidence in the emerging form and substance of the mechanism. The holding of the conference on the African continent went to demonstrate the joint ownership of FOCAC. In addition Addis Ababa is the seat of the African Union and thus holding the conference there was full of symbolism.

The second FOCAC was held in the era of the fourth generation of Chinese leaders; Hu Jintao (president) and Wen Jiabao (premier), with the latter attending the event. Representatives from 44 African countries including six African presidents were in attendance, a further indication of buy-in by African leaders. Further evidence of confidence in the mechanism could be seen in the attendance of representatives of the UN and other international as well as African regional organizations as observers. Furthermore, the theme of the 2003 seemed to target action points in addition to solidarity rhetoric: of the four-point proposal premier Wen put some premium on the democratization of the international system (euphemism for a UNSC seat for Africa) and expressed wariness about the challenges of globalization.

As with first conference, the second FOCAC was punctuated with the rhetoric of south-south solidarity as seen in statements such as ‘China is the largest developing country, and Africa the largest developing continent’ or ‘China and Africa together have more than one-third of the world's population’. Premier Wen explained that Chinese assistance would be “with the deepest sincerity and without any political conditions”, in other words, there would be no-strings-attached to the assistance in contrast to long critiqued Western assistance. This rhetoric has remained a permanent feature of subsequent FOCAC conferences (see Wekesa 2014:61 for an account of metaphors, catchphrases, exemplars and depictions).

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4 Notably Addis Ababa is the seat of the African Union and thus holding the event there was full of symbolism
5 It is broadly taken in new China rather than pre-revolution China (dating back thousands of years), that Mao Zedong and premier Zhou Enlai leadership (1949-1976) represents the first generation; Deng Xiaoping (1978-1992) the second generation and Jiang Zemin (1993-2003) the third generation
6 The 2003 FOCAC had ten heads of state and governments whereas the inaugural event had four
So much for the charming language, the Chinese side wrote into the FOCAC documents caveats about the inviolability of the ‘one China policy’ and support for re-unification with Taiwan.

The 2003 FOCAC action plan (for the period 2003-2006) was more expansive than the inaugural one, featuring, among others; training of up to 10,000 African personnel in different fields; opening Chinese commodity markets and granting tariff-free market access to some commodities from Africa’s LDCs; giving 8 African countries the approved tourist destination status and sponsorship of a series of youth and cultural activities.

News media was not captured in the 2003 FOCAC meeting. However, it would appear that 2005 (which was within the triennial FOCAC period 2003-2006) marked the beginnings of invitation of African journalists to China for short term and long term training.

The third FOCAC conference (2006)

The third ministerial conference, convened in Beijing November 2006, was effectively an upgraded leaders’ summit (see Li et.al 2012:32) as president Hu played host to 48 African presidents and heads of Government. Never before had such a number of African leaders congregated at a single location outside of Africa except at the UN general assembly. As it coincided with the opening, in 1956, of the first Chinese diplomatic mission in Africa (Egypt), it was also dubbed the fiftieth anniversary of Africa-China diplomatic relations. Scholars seem to make a connection between the intensity of high level visits to Africa by Chinese leaders, notably former president Hu Jintao and premier Wen Jiabao7 prior to the third FOCAC as a strategic priming of the relations (CCS 2010:7). China indeed declared 2006 the African Year. Earlier in the year, China’s Africa Policy, a seminal document that basically summarizes FOCAC programs and taps its underlying principles had been released. It gained accolades as ‘the highest level and the largest meeting between Chinese and African leadership since diplomatic relations were opened in the 1950s’ (CCS 2010:5). It is said to have ‘confirmed China’s new strategic partnership with Africa and China’s role as a global power on the continent’ (CCS 2010:5).

7 In January 2006, foreign minister Li Zhaoxing visited Cape Verde, Senegal, Mali, Liberia, Nigeria and Libya; in April president Hu visited Morocco, Nigeria and Kenya; in June, premier Wen Jiabao went to Egypt, Nigeria, Congo, Angola, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda (see CCS 2010:10)
Probably buoyed by the grand reception and having benefitted from Chinese largesse, African leaders gave approval to the Chinese model of development (often referred to in some quarters as Beijing Consensus), which can be interpreted in reverse as a rejection of the Western developmental approaches. In passing, the Chinese development model is one in which engagements with Africa are not loaded with values such as democracy and observance of human rights while the broadly, the Western development model comes with the need for African countries to adhere to good governance principles.

On the international stage, it was decided that Chinese and African foreign ministers would forthwith meet on the sidelines of the annual UN General Assembly in New York. Li et.al (2012:33) reports that the first such meeting was held in New York on September 26 2007, a year after the 2006 FOCAC. Wekesa (2012) reckons that ‘while the convenience of such meetings was clear, it was obvious that holding such meetings on American soil would have had its own symbolism open to various interpretations.’ For instance it would suggest that China and Africa were/are challenging the US and Europe right there in New York, the UN headquarters.

As with the previous two FOCACs, there were pledges galore for the period 2007 to 2009. Of symbolic significance was China’s pledge to build and donate a headquarters for the African Union in Addis Ababa. The US$200 million skyscraper was completed and handed over to the AU in January 2012.

Another pledge with far reaching ramifications was the creation of the China Africa Development Fund with a pledge that its capitalization would reach US$5 billion in short order. It was framed as a fund that would bolster Chinese firms venturing into Africa. The commitment for China’s building of 30 hospitals, provision of anti-malarial drugs and malaria treatment centers seems to have also had a powerful public diplomacy impact as it triggered the writing of a number of works by Africa-China scholars.

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9 For instance Chinese medical cooperation in Africa with special emphasis on the medical teams and anti-malaria campaign (Li, A. 2011)
Information and communication technology was identified as an area for collaboration particularly with regards to helping African countries narrow the digital divide and embrace the ethos of an information society.

It is during FOCAC 2006 conference that action plans to do with news media were made thusly:

Support and encouragement for more (positive) reporting and coverage by news media, provision of mutual assistance and facilitation to each other’s news agencies in sending resident and non-resident correspondents for news reporting, hosting of workshops and training for African correspondents and invitation of heads of press authorities and media groups as well as correspondents from Africa to China to exchange views, cover news and explore ways of conducting effective cooperation.

The fact of introduction of news media action plans into the FOCAC mechanism indicates that this sector was deemed important for one reason or another. An indicator that the news media elements of FOCAC 2006 was being implemented can be seen in the convening of a major seminar for African journalists by China’s Information Office of the State Council (IOSC) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs on July 15 2009\textsuperscript{10}. Themed ‘the role of media in promoting China-Africa relations and projecting the voice of developing countries in the international public sphere’, the seminar brought together 70 African delegates from 27 African countries. At the 2006 conference, former Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi spoke for the popular sentiments of African and Chinese leaders when he ‘challenged Western media reports that China is selling low-priced and poor quality products in Africa’ (see CCS 2010:14).

The fourth conference was held in Sharm el Sheikh in Egypt late 2009 at the height of the global financial crisis. Rather than being an entirely negative development, the financial crisis provided an opportunity for China in the face largely incapacitated Western and global financial institutions including the Bretton Woods institutions which were unable to meet the financial needs of Africa. It was acknowledged that ‘the trade volume (between China and Africa) had dropped to US$91.07 billion in 2009 as a result of the international financial crisis, (but) China (had) become Africa’s largest trade partner (outpacing the US) in 2009 for the first time’\textsuperscript{11}.

\textsuperscript{10} This is within the 2006-2009 period as the next fourth FOCAC was held in November 2009, before this event
\textsuperscript{11} See the Information Office of the State Council’s (IOSC) \textit{China-Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation} whitepaper, 2010
A key development with far reaching implications for public diplomacy was the launch of a China-Africa joint research and exchange program. This appears to have been the first time for focused civil society initiatives under FOCAC.

Conclusion

Having reviewed FOCAC conferences between 2000 and 2009, the next installment focuses on the fifth conference held in Beijing in July 2012. Being the most recent conference and falling right before the sixth conference merits greater analysis as we shall see.

Sources on FOCAC: [http://www.focac.org/eng/](http://www.focac.org/eng/)

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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 Rwigi, 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.
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