

Contrasting Perceptions: Chinese, African, and European Perspectives on the China–Africa Summit

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The third and, so far largest, summit of the Forum for Chinese–African Cooperation (FOCAC) was characterized by harmony, bringing together 1,700 delegates from China and Africa under the motto »Friendship, peace, cooperation, and development.« Forty-eight African states were represented, 41 of them for the first time, by their head of state or government. At the end the participants adopted the »Beijing Declaration,« as well as the »Action Plan 2007–2009.« Both documents were unanimously hailed by the parties, 50 years after the commencement of diplomatic relations between China and Africa, as »historical milestones« and as a manifesto for a »new kind of strategic partnership.«

In the agreements common principles and goals are defined which are to form the basis for intensive exchange and cooperation. Beyond that they include a comprehensive package of concrete investment and development aid commitments on the part of the Chinese for the next three years, including favorable credits in the amount of three billion US dollars, preferential credits for the purchase of Chinese goods to the value of two billion US dollars, as well as the doubling of Chinese development aid by 2009 (see Infobox). Within the framework of the second Chinese–African Entrepreneurs Conference on the fringe of the summit Chinese firms in addition concluded investment agreements with 11 African states in the amount of 1.9 billion US dollars.

Background: China's »Africa Year«

The FOCAC summit undoubtedly represented the highpoint of 2006, designated »Africa year« in China. In January the government of the People's Republic had attracted a lot of attention with the publication of its Africa-policy guidelines. In the ensuing months both Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and President Hu Jintao visited the African continent and concluded numerous bilateral agreements with individual states.

China is courting Africa under the aegis of South-South cooperation and in search of support in international organizations, as well as in the One China policy. In the foreground, however, stand economic interests: the search for markets and, above all, raw materials.

Booming Trade

Since the establishment of FOCAC in 2000 China has become one of the most significant actors on the African continent. The volume of trade has increased more than fourfold since 2000 and this year it is estimated it will for the first time exceed the 50 billion US dollar mark. A further doubling by 2010 has been predicted in Beijing and looks likely. China is already Africa's third most important trade partner, after the USA and France.

Africa exports primarily raw materials, particularly crude oil – around 30 percent of Chinese oil imports come from Africa – and unprocessed metals, while processed consumer goods such as clothing, plastic products, and electrical goods are imported from China. The expected development of the trade structure and the effects on the African export industries are disputed. A recent World Bank study emphasizes the advantages for consumers and the opportunities arising from the rise of China and India for the export of processed goods from Africa (Broadman 2006). Against that, an OECD study comes to the conclusion that China's need for resources and competitive pressure could lead in the long term to the African national economies getting into a raw materials trap and a diversification of the economies will not take place (Chen et al. 2005).

»Beijing Declaration« and »Action Plan 2007–2009« – The most important Resolutions

FOCAC is to be strengthened and the bilateral exchange of politicians and officials intensified at all levels.

China and the African states assure one another of mutual support in international forums and demand stronger action on the part of the industrialized countries to attain international development goals (»Millennium Development Goals«), the resumption of the Doha world trade round, and better representation of African states in international

organizations. In addition, the signatories confirm their acknowledgement of the One China principle.

China expressly supports regional integration efforts in Africa and the NEPAD process of the African Union.

China has made the following commitments to be met by the next FOCAC summit in 2009:

- ▶ favorable credits in the amount of three billion US dollars and preferential credits for the purchase of Chinese goods to the value of two billion US dollars;
- ▶ doubling of development aid for Africa by 2009;
- ▶ further debt relief for heavily indebted African countries;
- ▶ establishment of a fund of five billion US dollars to encourage Chinese firms to invest in Africa;
- ▶ duty free market access in China for 440 rather than the current 190 categories of goods from the 29 poorest participating states (Least Developed Countries);
- ▶ establishment of five special economic zones in Africa;
- ▶ construction and equipping of hospitals, malaria prevention centers, and schools;
- ▶ further education programs for 15,000 employees from African countries;
- ▶ dispatch of agricultural experts and construction of agricultural technology centers;
- ▶ 4,000 rather than the current 2,000 government scholarships for African students for study in China.

At the second Chinese–African Entrepreneurs Conference on the fringe of the summit a Chinese–African chamber of trade was set up. In addition, Chinese firms concluded investment agreements with 11 African states, including South Africa and Kenya, in the amount of around 1.9 billion US dollars.

China as Investor and Donor Country

The second most discussed element of extended relations after the Chinese–African trade structure is the fact that China is increasingly acting as a development donor and investor. China is distinguished from Europe and the USA above all in terms of the principle of mutual non-interference in internal affairs: China invests in and trades with states

such as Zimbabwe and Sudan which are sanctioned by Europe and the USA on account of their human rights abuses, unresolved violent conflicts, and massive corruption.

Chinese firms are also increasingly successfully applying for tenders in Africa. Their immense cost advantages as against Western or South African firms is based among other things on the strategy of deploying almost exclusively Chinese workers for their projects. Local technology transfer and employment effects often fail to materialize, but China's contribution to improving infrastructure is apparent and the efficiency and pragmatism of the Chinese impress many African state and government leaders. Sierra Leone's ambassador in Beijing describes the advantages of the Chinese approach vividly: »If a G8 country had wanted to build the stadium we would still be holding consultations. The Chinese, however, simply come and do it. They don't need any meetings to investigate the possible effects on the environment, human rights, or good and bad governance. I'm not saying that it's correct, but only that China's approach is successful as a result.«

Reconstructing the Perspectives

It is certain that even in the medium term China will be one of the most important external actors in Africa. The opportunities or risks for African national economies arising from this and the political consequences of extended relations can only be estimated with difficulty at present. However, or precisely for that reason much is being written, speculated, and above all judged at present concerning the new Chinese–African partnership – mostly from the Western perspective. It is seldom asked how the development of mutual relations is regarded and evaluated in the countries concerned. In this report the perceptions and evaluations of the Beijing summit and Chinese–African relations in various countries are the center of attention. We shall first present views of the general situation from China and by way of example for Africa from South Africa and Kenya, before tracing an external view from a European perspective.

Chinese Perspectives: big Stage, big Theater?

A week before the beginning of the FOCAC summit, Beijing city center was transformed. All the main streets were ablaze in the colors of huge placards and countless pennants to greet the summit participants. The media made Africa the main topic of reporting for days. While interest in Africa is rather low among the population, the government has raised relations with Africa to a completely »new kind of strategic partnership.« The unusually large scale of the summit in Beijing is also perceived as an organizational test run for the Olympic Games in 2008. However, the thought does come involuntarily to mind: whoever builds such a large backdrop plans to put on a play.

The maxim of Chinese politics is internal stability which must be ensured by means of continuous economic growth. The safeguarding of raw materials and markets plays a significant role in this. The transformation of Chinese state-owned companies into concerns with an international presence is increasing in importance. In all these areas Africa provides an opportunity to feel one's way in new fields of activity with little competitive pressure.

For Chinese foreign policy one concept is central that in the West is often smiled at: striving for a harmonious world. However, this concept does not describe a fantasy world, but an international sphere which is necessary for creating stability and a harmonious society. Access to raw materials and markets is therefore a component part of a strategy for maintaining harmony. It is ensured by friendly contacts and conflict avoidance at international level. For the sake of this harmonious world the international community must respect the »five principles of peaceful coexistence« drawn up by China as early as the 1950s:

1. Mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.
2. Mutual non-aggression.
3. Mutual non-interference in internal affairs.
4. Equality and mutual benefit.
5. Peaceful coexistence.

The Chinese perception of foreign policy must be seen against this background. Chinese South–South cooperation seeks to clearly differentiate itself from the West by non-interference. Beyond that, as the political heir of Deng Xiaoping China keeps a low profile and does not act as leader of the developing countries. As recently as a year ago China still took the view that one could contribute to achieving international development

goals (Millennium Development Goals) only to the extent that poverty was reduced at home through economic advancement. Aid for other developing countries must come from the West; aid could be given only to a limited extent. One year later, however, its role as development-policy actor is being emphasized.

On the basis of the claim to equality of relations, however, any leadership claim is rejected, though in the Chinese view this in no way contradicts the aim of extending spheres of influence. Only 14 African states supply China with oil, but 48 African states were represented at the FOCAC summit. With the support of the majority of African states, China could promote its aims better, including its stance on peaceful coexistence of different social, political, and economic systems.

China sees itself expressly as a model of economic advancement and national emancipation. Western criticisms that China is undermining development efforts meet with incomprehension. Even if the prized »win-win relations« have a few unavoidable weak points they are still better than the West's oscillations between interference and disinterestedness.

Chinese citizens are, if anything, indifferent towards the foreign policy offensive in Africa. It is often difficult to get across to them why others are being helped when large parts of the population at home are still in poverty. Perhaps it is for that reason that the leadership stresses its trade interests and insists on the mutual benefits of trade with Africa.

The opinion is widespread among Chinese academics that it is both correct and appropriate to intensify contacts with Africa because it is rich in unexploited raw materials, and there is no collision with US interests there. Western criticisms that China is pursuing a kind of neo-colonialism are regarded as unjustified. Like any other state, China is merely looking after its own legitimate interests. The Western industrialized countries must concede this to China too. Unlike the West in past decades China ultimately respects the independence of African states. Western interference is generally a sore point from the Chinese viewpoint. Increased Western interest in African relations often gives rise to suspicions in China. »Does Europe take an interest when, for example, we invest in the raw materials sector in Australia?«, remarks one political scientist. »In Africa, on the other hand, our actions are scrutinized minutely.«

The image presented by the media before and during the summit contributed to build an atmosphere of Chinese–African friendship. Two days after the summit, however, this wave ebbed as abruptly as it had begun. Furthermore, this display of commitment to Africa should not mislead

us into thinking that Africa is only a sideshow for China. Even if Chinese–African friendship is stylized as the new foreign-policy cornerstone for the moment it remains largely symbolic. Relations with the USA, the Asian neighbors, Russia and Europe are still at the center of Chinese foreign policy. It is becoming apparent, however, that China increasingly wishes to operate on a par with the West and with FOCAC has created its own international sphere of influence.

South African Perspectives: first Attempts to Shape Relations

In the weeks before the FOCAC summit Liu Guijin was much in demand. China's ambassador in South Africa appeared on news programs and at conferences and had to explain China and its interests to Africa. He had long been used to the critical questions which were put to him again and again. In South Africa there has been great public and political interest in China for years.

South Africa is China's most important trading partner on the continent. Bilateral trade amounts to around 20 percent of the volume of continental trade with the Middle Kingdom. The structure of South Africa's trade with China, however, is similar to that with other African countries. While South Africa mainly exports raw materials, it imports almost exclusively processed goods (though its imports outstrip its exports threefold).

Beyond the economic dimension the two countries are linked by an interest in a strengthened South–South cooperation. The interests of the developing countries in this respect should be afforded more consideration internationally and international organizations and bodies should be made more representative and democratic. South Africa regards itself as a leading continental power and African representative in the world, and it sees China as a crucial partner in realizing this global agenda.

The South African perception of China is shaped by its earlier support for African liberation movements. Even today this forms the basis of mutual trust. Secondly, China's successful development model, which in contrast to Western development models was implemented within the framework of socialism and by its own efforts, is regarded with great respect in South Africa. Generally speaking, China's perception in South Africa oscillates between the extremes of euphoric admiration, political pragmatism, and the feeling of being under threat.

In relation to the FOCAC summit the following themes in particular were discussed by government representatives at public functions and in the media:

- ▶ China as South–South partner.
- ▶ Economic consequences of China’s involvement in Africa.
- ▶ Cooperation between the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and FOCAC.
- ▶ European and US criticisms of China’s involvement in Africa.

China’s renewed commitment to act as important partner of the African continent for stronger international support for an independent African development agenda was greeted very positively. China’s agreement with South Africa’s aims at strengthening the United Nations and making international organizations and bodies more representative and democratic was greeted in the same way.

China has also developed into a significant economic partner for South Africa. At the same time, parts of the processing industry are threatened by imports from China or have already been driven out. The trade unions persuaded the government in the course of the year to negotiate a temporary voluntary reduction in textile exports to South Africa with the Chinese government.

In its own view South Africa in its cooperation with China has, on behalf of the continent, taken on the role of more strongly integrating the FOCAC process in regional and continental organizations such as the African Union (AU) and programs such as the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), which China has in principle declared itself ready to do.

A further important dimension of the Chinese–African partnership which was discussed during the FOCAC summit in South Africa is the principle of equal rights and mutual respect. South Africa and Africa as a whole feel themselves taken seriously by China as an independent partner. They are not regarded in the first instance as aid recipients, but as trading partners. Political conditionalities – apart from acceptance of the One China principle – which Western donors are increasingly demanding do not exist. European and US criticisms of China’s involvement in Africa are considered double standards and disrespectfulness in South Africa. South Africa’s president Thabo Mbeki, who recognizes the problems of the structure of trade with China and approaches them cautiously, strongly resists interference from abroad. Strong external criticisms of extended Chinese–African cooperation, which in South Africa and other

countries are regarded as attempts to make up their minds for them, could drive the continent further into China's arms.

The largest trade union umbrella organization in the country, COSATU, welcomed the agreements of the FOCAC summit overall, but asked the government to negotiate with China measures to promote labor-intensive processing industries. Furthermore, the umbrella organization is currently the only voice in South Africa which criticizes China's toleration of human rights abuses in African countries, as well as human rights and labor law abuses in China itself.

The generous commitments made by the Chinese government at the FOCAC summit exceeded South Africa's expectations. They are interpreted as proof of China's serious and sustained interest, beyond energy and raw materials extraction, in Africa's development. Offers of help in the areas of infrastructure, education and training, and economic support are interpreted similarly. China's readiness to permit stronger coordination of the FOCAC process with NEPAD is perceived equally positively. Combined with a – particularly widespread on the South African side – South–South enthusiasm, the FOCAC summit is regarded on the whole as a remarkable success. There is a realization, however, that the African countries must now take care that the assistance is managed in such a way that it serves the continent's long-term development and the population benefits from it. President Thabo Mbeki has great hopes of future Chinese–African cooperation. He has described the FOCAC summit as the first step on a long, common path of successful development for China and Africa.

Kenyan Perspectives: Gifts from the Far East

While still at the airport in Nairobi, just after he had returned from China, President Mwai Kibaki revealed in an aside what South–South partner China means for Kenya. Speaking to the press he evaluated the Beijing summit as a milestone »since the Chinese government has promised us support for important development projects.« In other words, China is an important new and obliging donor country. »Kibaki collects gifts for Kenya in China«, read the headline in the Kenyan daily »The Standard.«

In fact, Kibaki presented a whole series of Chinese treats, including bypasses for Nairobi, a maize factory, the renovation of a youth training

center, and equipment for hospitals and malaria stations. The total value of this gift basket from the Far East: around 84 million US dollars, distributed among areas which have so far tended to be neglected by the West, telecommunications, health care, and physical infrastructure (above all roads and electricity). It is now also clear what Foreign Minister Raphael Tuju was seeking when in the spring he demanded that the country look East. The orientation towards East Asia is »a fundamental, pragmatic, and inevitable decision,« he said in April. At that time came the aid and investment package, not linked to preconditions that Hu Jintao presented on his visit to Kenya, which, in view of the sanctions imposed by various donors due to numerous corruption scandals, was very opportune.

The West's complaints that Chinese financial injections without conditionalities have frustrated efforts to promote good governance are at best wearily dismissed in official circles in Kenya. The West should first prove how far its conditionality-based approach has got it, in the – representative – view of Paul Otung, member of the Interministerial Committee for Kenyan–Chinese Relations. They are simply, one reads elsewhere, »tired of the ›Big Brother behaviour‹ of the West.« The struggle for good governance, democracy, and against corruption cannot be imposed from outside but must ultimately come from within. The fact that China helps where otherwise no one would help, such as in Sudan or in Zimbabwe, is ultimately very much to be welcomed. Many fully endorse the question posed by the Ethiopian Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin: »Isn't the right to development also a question of human rights?« If Europe and the USA were serious about Africa's development they could play their trump card and finally open up all markets to African products. On the whole, according to the official position, the intensified competition as regards development aid brought about by China is very healthy.

In the numerous commentaries and leading articles on China's role which appeared at the time of the FOCAC summit, one also finds warning voices concerning the political consequences of China's approach, particularly in relation to unstable neighbor Sudan. Above all, however, misgivings are concentrated on another aspect: the superior competition of the development giant on its own and on third markets. The trade deficit with China is growing and more and more branches are coming under pressure from the Far East: after the textile and furniture industries, now for example the cut flowers industry which employs 500,000 Kenyans

and generates an export volume of 290 million US dollars, 70 percent of which is accounted for by the rose trade. To anyone hoping to develop China as a potential market and even to increase these figures, it would come as something of a shock to learn that the Chinese government is investing several billion dollars in its own rose export industry in order to create employment in rural areas.

Furthermore, the glut of cheap consumer goods from China is a problem not only because it brings national industries to their knees but because imports are increasingly taking place via Chinese trade networks, to the detriment of local merchants. The socio-political dynamite of migration from China which has occasionally given rise to protests in other African countries has also been raised from time to time in the Kenyan media.

It is clearly perceived in the press that China is touchy about the raising of these aspects and the questioning of the mutually beneficial South-South partnership. Caricatures in Kenya's »Daily Nation« on the subject of China's business interests were promptly castigated by the press attaché of the Chinese embassy as in bad taste – after all, China merely has the »promotion of world peace and development« in mind. Before the FOCAC summit he again stressed that China is a good friend of Kenya – not without referring to the West's colonial past.

How far China's friendship and interest in Kenya's development goes, on the other hand, was, in the view of many Kenyan economic experts, shown by China's opposition to a continuation of the trade preferences granted by the USA within the framework of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Finally, there was discontent when Kenya's application for a radio frequency in China for tourism and marketing was rejected, while China Radio International has enjoyed its own frequency in Kenya since the beginning of the year.

Neither government nor opposition raise such issues publicly, let alone ideas about the organization of trade relations and reducing the trade deficit. In Beijing too the Kenyan negotiating position is scarcely clear. »In particular it was noted that there is no agreement between the African countries – not even with our direct neighbors,« said one of the Kenyan delegates.

Unlike in South Africa, in Kenya even the trade union umbrella organization COTU hews to the China line. While the General Secretary, in the President's wake, paid a one-month friendship visit to China his organization missed the chance to use the debate about the role of China as

catalyst for a general consideration of questions of local employment effects which have failed to materialize in the case of foreign investments or threatened workplaces in national industries. How China's potential can be exploited in development terms is barely discussed. One attempt on the part of the President was tourism from the Middle Kingdom. He personally presented an advertising campaign in Beijing for his country and in fact the number of tourists from China increased by as much as 31.4 percent in 2005. The absolute figure (11,000 Chinese tourists in 2005) is sobering, however, showing once again how far apart expectations and reality are in relation to China's potential. Since further ideas concerning its increase and utilization are lacking the »new strategic partner« for Kenya remains what it is: a welcome donor and above all also a serious competitor.

European Perspectives: Skeptical Evaluation of the new Friendship

China's intensive cooperation with Africa is increasingly drawing attention in the international community, and particularly in Europe. The question of why China is involved in Africa, which is regarded by many solely as the continent of catastrophes and famine, is often answered primarily in relation to China's increasing need for raw materials. China »just wants its oil, ores and timber – plus its backing at the United Nations,« as the British Economist summarizes China's ambitions in Africa. »China has gone into Africa in a big way,« according to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

The central point of criticism by Western industrialized countries is China's abandonment of political conditionalities in the awarding of credits (China has the largest foreign exchange reserves in the world). In contrast to the other development aid donor countries, China imposes no conditions on the recipient country regarding criteria such as good governance or social and environmental standards. With this policy China supports authoritarian regimes such as those in Sudan and Zimbabwe, which have had sanctions imposed on them by the international community, and is also undermining the human rights policy of the OECD states. According to Development Minister Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, even investments in infrastructure or industry are problematic if they take no account of the rules binding the other parties.

Another point of criticism from the Western standpoint is the lack of transparency: data on China's foreign aid payments (Official Development Assistance, ODA) are so far not available. In its new China strategy the European Commission is therefore demanding that China makes these details transparent.

There are also reservations from the OECD standpoint concerning China's regional strategy, which is primarily directed towards raw material extraction. In many African countries the unregulated exploitation of raw materials (oil, wood from tropical forests, coltan, diamonds, and so on) contributes to bad governance. The illegal sale of raw materials keeps war economies alive, and this in turn can draw out armed conflicts. In addition, between 2000 and 2003 China was, after Russia, the biggest supplier of arms to African states. The current organization of Chinese–African economic relations could, in the OECD's view, potentially have negative consequences for regional stability and the security situation in Africa.

The idea has also been put forward that China's »charm offensive« is ensuring the agreement of large blocks of African countries in international organizations such as the United Nations and thereby winning more influence.

Also regarded with skepticism, finally, is whether and to what extent the »Chinese development model« is being taken up in Africa – »Beijing consensus« instead of »Washington consensus«?

On the other hand, China's revived involvement in Africa is also evaluated very positively. In the end it is accepted that China contributed to positive economic growth in Africa of over 5 percent in 2005 as well as to improving infrastructure. In principle the traditional donors appreciate the fact that China has taken on responsibility. In particular, China's commitment to a strengthened multilateralism is held in high esteem, as for example the International Poverty Reduction Center founded together with UNDP in 2005 that is to reinforce dialogue between China and other developing countries, as well as between China and international development organizations.

At the FOCAC summit there were calls from the Chinese side for more aid for African countries, as well as for the peaceful resolution of conflicts and reconstruction in post-conflict countries. These demands are also in the interests of the Western community. The common ground between the programmatic approaches of the EU and the Chinese statement of principles on China's Africa policy is barely addressed, however. On the

whole, skepticism prevails in Europe concerning China's influence on Africa's development.

Conclusions and Outlook

The perspectives of the various countries first of all clearly show one thing: it is generally acknowledged that reinforced Chinese–African relations have dramatically changed the conditions for Africa's development in the space of a few years. The continent's classic dependency relationship with Europe and the USA has been broken. Suddenly there is an economic and political alternative.

For Africa's identity and politics, this new partnership, which rhetorically emphasizes friendship, respect, and equal rights, represents an enormous increase in self-esteem. The fact that Africa is no longer treated as a group of needy recipient countries but rather courted as a trade and investment partner contributes significantly to this.

Strategies for the exploitation of this partnership for its own development process currently exist on the Chinese side, while they are lacking on the African side. Particularly in South Africa it is increasingly understood that there needs to be an active approach to relations. Ideally, Africa would have to speak with one voice. Given the different interests concerning cooperation with China, this seems unlikely at present. Interesting in this connection, though, is the recent appointment of a high-level working group by the AU Commission, which is to examine the question of building strategic partnerships with Brazil, India, and particularly China.

European or American criticisms and interference are interpreted as envy on both the Chinese and the African side, or as presumptuousness and double standards. Particularly the lack of success of Western development cooperation deprives the criticism of legitimacy from this standpoint.

The Beijing Resolutions, however, contain possible starting points for a trilateral dialogue between China, Africa, and the OECD countries. China's announcement that in future it would cooperate more closely with the AU and subregional organizations can be included here. Beyond that, the cooperation and coordination of the FOCAC process with NEPAD is to be intensified. In July 2006 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed on closer cooperation and coordination by the NEPAD secretariat

and the Chinese FOCAC implementation committee. China's concrete offers of support to the AU and NEPAD have so far been confined to material benefits: a conference center for the AU in Addis Ababa, as well as 500,000 US dollars for the training of nurses within the framework of the NEPAD Action Plan. Perhaps these represent the first cautious steps on the way to closer exchanges, both substantively and politically.

The pursuit of common starting points for strengthened dialogue and better cooperation between the classic donors, China, and Africa is a great challenge for all actors. An indispensable condition for this is first of all better understanding of the different perceptions and assessments of Chinese–African relations.

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