

Policy Brief

17

Africa-China Relations: Building a Community with a Shared Future



Authors: Dr Chidochashe Nyere, Programme Head of the Global Africa Unit at the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation, University of Johannesburg.

Ms Hellen Adogo, Research Assistant at the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation, University of Johannesburg.

Dr Gideon Chitanga, Researcher at the Centre for Africa China Studies, University of Johannesburg.

Date of Publication: May 2024

5 Molesey Avenue, Auckland Park 2029, Johannesburg, South Africa

+27 11 559 7230

<http://ipatc.joburg>

1 Introduction

The University of Johannesburg's (UJ) Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC), UJ's Centre for Africa China Studies (CACs), and the Chinese Consular in South Africa co-hosted a Lapa roundtable discussion on "Building a Community with a Shared Future" at UJ on 6 February 2024.

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was founded 24 years ago in 2000. Since its inception, FOCAC has aimed to facilitate collective dialogue and practical cooperation between China and Africa. Beijing will host the ninth FOCAC meeting later this year, and this dialogue served as a series of precursor conversations to the FOCAC meeting scheduled for, a date yet to be confirmed, but likely at the end of 2024.

The meeting highlighted the cordial relations that have been forged between Africa and China over the years. The dialogue was attended by 20 academics and researchers who specialise in Africa-China relations, including five Chinese officials and representatives in South Africa. The robust engagement highlighted issues on the asymmetrical trade relations that Africa was, and is continually, subjected to by the capitalist powers, the linguistic challenges encountered by African representatives, and their impact on legal comprehension of treaties, agreements and deals, and the leadership deficit of African rulers.

China and South Africa, and by extension Africa, share the same vision in holding conversations that provoke thought and exchanging views on building the Africa-China community with a common future. The recently concluded Central Conference on Work Related to Foreign Affairs which was held in Beijing, China, noted that "building a community with a shared future for mankind is the noble goal pursued by China in connecting major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics for the new era". The dialogues' theme, "Building a Community with a Shared Future" was initially introduced by China in its foreign affairs agenda a decade ago. for its foreign affairs. It is not only a vision, but also a scientific paradigm that seeks to build an open, inclusive and fair world with lasting peace and shared posterity. It seeks to apply common values for humanity with features such as mutual respect, justice and cooperation. The need to build an even stronger China-Africa relations was decoded during the FOCAC September 2018 meeting in Beijing.



“The robust engagement highlighted issues on the asymmetrical trade relations that Africa was, and is continually, subjected to by the capitalist powers...”

DR. CHITANGA GIVING WELCOMING REMARKS DURING THE LAPA FORUM TITLED, "HAND IN HAND TO BUILD HIGH LEVEL AFRICA-CHINA COMMUNITY WITH SHARED FUTURE".

Source IPATC

2 Contexts

The 2018 FOCAL meeting articulated the following China's values and guiding principles in its relations with Africa and the global community:

- Sincerity
- Good faith
- Pursuing the greater good
- Shared interest
- Non-interference in African countries' choices
- Non-interference on domestic affairs of African countries
- No imposition of China's will on African countries
- No attachment of political strings to assistance to Africa
- No pursuit of selfish political gains through investment and financing cooperating with Africa

3 Historical Ties between Africa and China

It is on record that China supported many African countries during their struggles for independence from European colonial rule, through inter alia, ideological, financial, moral and military support, thereby establishing an undoubted alliance with these African countries. "China and Africa enjoy long-lasting friendship; China has always offered respect, appreciation and support for Africa. Chinese people have shared mutual assistance with African people"[1]. For example, China played an important role in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle against its occupation by Rhodesians in general, and the Ian Smith regime specifically. It was observed that Chinese support for Zimbabwe's political parties specifically the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), collectively identified as nationalists, predates the official formation of the Zimbabwean government of 1980, when Zimbabwe got its independence against the British through guerilla warfare. China recognized the authentic aspirations of Zimbabweans and offered political support before most global players recognized Zimbabwe as an independent state. These historical relations between Zimbabwe and China continue to be cherished by both countries and have acted as the basis for continued mutually beneficial relations. Indeed, "China has stood with Africa through thick and thin".

Furthermore, South Africa's ANC enjoyed cordial relations with China even during the apartheid era. The African National Congress (ANC) long had ties with Beijing predating 1994 when South Africa transitioned into a democracy. China assisted and supported the ANC way before the latter ascended to power in 1994. Thus, Chinese support for the ANC predated the democratic era in South African history. While there had been periods of subtle tensions between the ANC and Beijing over some matters, these were short-lived and further enhanced their partnership. Undoubtedly, China has stood the test of time when it comes to its relations with various African countries, such as Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Sudan, Zambia and Zimbabwe, to mention but a few. Thus, "China and Africa have stood together in success and adversity setting an example for building a global community with a shared future"

[1] This was stated in the keynote address by the Chinese Consular General in South Africa, H.E., Mr Pan Qingjiang

Today, China continues to be on the right side of history in relation to its positionality on current global affairs; notably, its stance on the ongoing geopolitical conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and the hostility between Palestine and Israel. This owes to China's strategic stance of non-interference in the domestic affairs of foreign states. China's position augers well with Africa's vision and aspirations as this fosters a sense of autonomy and sovereignty among African countries. This has won China's approval by most African rulers who see this as a symbol of mutual respect.

The dialogue reiterated that "China-Africa relations are rock solid". The cooperation has improved the conditions for economic and social development in Africa and foster mutual trust among peoples of China and Africa. For instance, between 2009 and 2020, South Africa's biggest trading partner has been China. During the same period, China built more than 13000 kilometres of road and railway, as well as 80 large-scale power facilities across African soil. Additionally, China funded the building of more than 130 medical facilities across Africa and built about 45 sports venues. Moreover, China sponsored the construction of over 170 schools and trained more than 160000 personnels from Africa. In addition to this, China funded the construction of the African Union headquarters and during the Covid-19 pandemic, China cancelled African countries' debt and provided "free loans"[2]. Be that as it may, this means China wields unmatched influence and power over African states. While China may mean well with its support and financial investment, it contributes to the asymmetrical power relations that potentially leave Africa vulnerable to manipulation and undue influence by China.

“ China funded the construction of the African Union headquarters and during the Covid-19 pandemic China cancelled African countries' and provided free loan.”

4 The Antecedents of the Asymmetrical Economic and Power Relations

Be that as it may, this means China wields unmatched influence and power over African states. While China may mean well with its support and financial investment, it contributes to the asymmetrical power relations that potentially leave Africa vulnerable to manipulation and undue influence by China. such, China continues to benefit – not from its own making – but from the fragmentation of African states. This continues to sustain the asymmetrical power relations of the current world order that thrives on Africa's division and contributes to "Africa's precarious position in global multi-lateral platforms".



MS BONGIWE TUTU FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND GIVING HER REMARKS DURING ROUNDTABLE ADDRESS 3

Source IPATC

[2] This was highlighted by H.E. Mr Pan Qingjiang

The division continues to weaken African collective action and coordination, thereby impacting its agency especially as it relates to multilateral platforms and institutions.

This dialogue highlighted Africa's quagmire as it relates to its international affairs. While the meeting found expression in South Africa, there were common issues, such as the African positionality, agency and experience that cut across African states. This may result in ignoring the fact that this dialogue was held in South Africa and South Africa has its unique experience of African agency, experience and positionality which is different and cannot be used as a yardstick to represent the African experience. Thus, the mistake that most global players commit concerning African states is that they treat all African states as a single political entity. Yet, these states are unique and are correctly recognised as sovereign states. Inversely, the other error that is often committed by global players as they relate to Africa is to approach the African Union (AU) as though it is unitary, yet it's a collective of many states.

Although the AU, as a collective of 54 African states, was created to coordinate African continental affairs, the AU continues to be enmeshed in lengthy bureaucratic procedures and processes that debilitate African agency specifically in relation to decisions that require global urgency. Thus, global players, including China, have tended to exert asymmetrical pressure when dealing with African states. The sizes of the Chinese economies and individual African states remain unequal, and this militates against African states. Global players such as the US, Russia, and China approach Africa as a unit, yet Africa is not unitary, despite the efforts of the AU to forge continental integration. "It is easy for Beijing to convene a meeting, approach an African country of its choice and strike a deal with it. With Africa, it is quite a tedious process to circumnavigate the bureaucratic processes to convene a meeting for all 55 Heads of State, let alone getting them to agree on a way forward on any matter".

5 Leadership, Knowledge, and Information Deficit in Africa

African leaders continue to fall short on leadership and seemingly use the mechanism of the AU to mainly endorse each other. "The AU has failed us as citizens of Africa". There is a deep sense that the AU has failed as a vehicle for the socio economic and political emancipation of African nationals, but rather it has increasingly become a club of states that protect each other from retribution following the numerous failures of its leaders in their respective jurisdictions.



“The sizes of the Chinese economies and individual African states remain unequal, and this militates against African states.”

CONSULAR GENERAL – H.E. PAN QINGJIANG GIVING THE KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE LAPA FORUM ON THE 6TH OF FEBRUARY 2024

Source: IPATC

Furthermore, the dialogue exposed the fact that “reporting on China remains inadequate and polarised, either portraying China as a predator or portraying Africa as a causality and victim to its engagements”. Many perspectives are largely dominated by Western narratives that are built outside of the African continent. This has tended to misinform public sentiment on China’s relations with African countries. However, some practices by Chinese citizens in Africa find resonance in such Western narratives in so far as they are entangled in human rights abuses in various African states. The seeming censure on such abuses by African authorities suggests a compromised stance, raising concerns that they may be prioritizing the protection of Chinese nationals., and further cementing the view that China wields unwarranted influence on African governments.

Moreover, there is a sustainability crisis looming on the African continent in terms of the kind of journalism that must rise to the occasion to accurately disseminate information and knowledge about China. It was noted that the “sustainability crisis in the practice of journalism and media where journalists in Africa lack adequate resources and skills to be able to efficiently unpack and tell the story of China’s engagements within the continent as well as in the Global South communities”. More importantly, the dialogue revealed that knowledge of China-Africa and the information space thereto is becoming more inaccessible and incomprehensible to the ordinary citizens on the ground. Thus, there is a need for journalists who can dissect, analyse and distil information in an accessible manner to common people on the streets. Linked to this issue of journalists failing to process complex information on China, it has contributed to perspectives in government, business and media to remain largely misinformed.



“There is a need for selecting African teams and representatives who are immersed in thorough research to understand what the terms of loan repayment entail”

HIGHLIGHTS DURING THE LAPA FORUM ON THE 6TH OF FEBRUARY HELD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG.

Source: IPATC

The lack of technical, expert, and credible knowledge about China in Africa remains a challenge even for government officials. African governments must harness their best legal, linguistic and financial minds to negotiate deals with global players such as China. There is a need for selecting African teams and representatives who are immersed in thorough research to understand what the terms of loan repayments entail, for example, in order to avert situations such as the controversy around the defaulting of Zambia and Uganda, and the subsequent possession of the Lusaka and Entebbe airports respectively, by China.

Closely associated with the knowledge deficit in Africa as it relates to China, the dialogue revealed that language was identified as a barrier that has contributed to African states' continual outwitting by China. China seemingly is doing well regarding their nationals learning native African languages which comes in handy for them when negotiations happen. The same cannot be said for African representatives; thus, there is a dissimulation between African negotiators and their desired outcomes due to linguistic barriers that impact on their understanding of the legalities involved in the negotiations. Thus, it is best to send in legal representatives who are equal to the task of negotiating for a positive outcome for African countries.

6 Conclusion

As the ninth FOCAC meeting approaches in Beijing, African states must acknowledge that after 24 years, maintaining the status quo is no longer viable. This upcoming gathering presents a crucial opportunity to evaluate the trajectory of Africa-China relations, particularly through the lens of trade engagements, global governance, infrastructure, and other key focal points that include energy and clean technologies. Moreover, it serves as a platform for Africans to showcase their commitment to rectifying the disparities in the relationship. While China has explored alternative avenues for engagement with African countries, such as through initiatives like BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), it is essential for African states to present a coordinated agenda. This coordinated effort is vital for advancing the objectives outlined in the AU's Agenda 2063, thereby fostering the development of an Africa-China community with a shared future that prioritises African interests. Of paramount importance, the Chinese friendship, cooperation, and partnership with African states and its model of engagement which serves as a global example must be applauded and it remains appreciated and invaluable to Africa's development and success.



DESCRIPTION: THE ABOVE IMAGE WAS TAKEN DURING THE "AFRICA-CHINA RELATIONS: BUILDING A COMMUNITY WITH A SHARED FUTURE" EVENT ON THE 6TH OF FEBRUARY 2024 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG.

First Row: Dr Ronel Toerien (CBE), Ms Reshika Dwarika (IPATC), Miss Jana De Kluiver (ISS), Hellen Adogo (IPATC), Pan Qingjiang (Consul General of China in SA), Prof Siphamandla Zondi (Director, IPATC), Dr Zhan Grace Mengshu (CACS), Prof Omowunmi Longe (FEBE) Ms Bongiwe Tutu (Africa-China Reporting- Wits), Ms Khensani Ntlemo (CACS), Ms Zizopho Masiza (CACS)

Second Row: Mr Ofentse Sebasa (IPATC), Dr Kudzayi Vanyoro (IPATC), Dr Chidoch Ashe Nyere (IPATC), Mr Mikatekiso Kubayi (IGD), Dr Sipumelele Duma (IPATC), Mr Edmund Uger (CACS), Dr Gideon Chitanga (CACS), Ms Lebo Mosebua (CACS), Mr Thomas Lethoba (Africa-China Reporting- Wits)

Source: IPATC

7 Policy Recommendations

The following 10 recommendations emerged from the Lapa policy dialogue held in Johannesburg in February 2024.

1. The AU must urgently unite, unify, amalgamate, and unionize. It must do away with the sovereignty clause in its Constitutive Charter.
2. African leaders must focus on a values-driven leadership style, founded on mutual respect, sincerity, honesty, accountability.
3. African states must do thorough research on the agreements they enter with China, and their implications and ramifications.
4. African states must invest in learning the Chinese (Mandarin) language for better communication.
5. Chinese authorities must look into more robust people-to-people engagement with independent non-state businesses and grassroots entities and entrepreneurs if their financial aid is to help the people it is intended for.
6. African and Chinese authorities must adopt more environmentally friendly practices as far as rehabilitating disused mining sites.
7. African and Chinese authorities must put in place accountability mechanisms at grassroots level in order to account to local peoples on how their resources are dealt with.
8. Chinese authorities must hold their citizens in African domains to account where matters and allegations of unfair labour, forced labour, unfavourable labour conditions have been levelled against their citizens.
9. African and Chinese authorities must ensure fair, transparent and mutually beneficial partnerships. Corruption and underhandedness must be frowned upon with the contempt they deserve.
10. Loans - that often come with exorbitant repayment terms - must be minimised, if not completely eradicated; instead, investment promotion must be heightened and encouraged by both African and Chinese actors.



HIGHLIGHTS DURING THE LAPA FORUM ON THE 6TH OF FEBRUARY HELD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG.

Source: IPATC

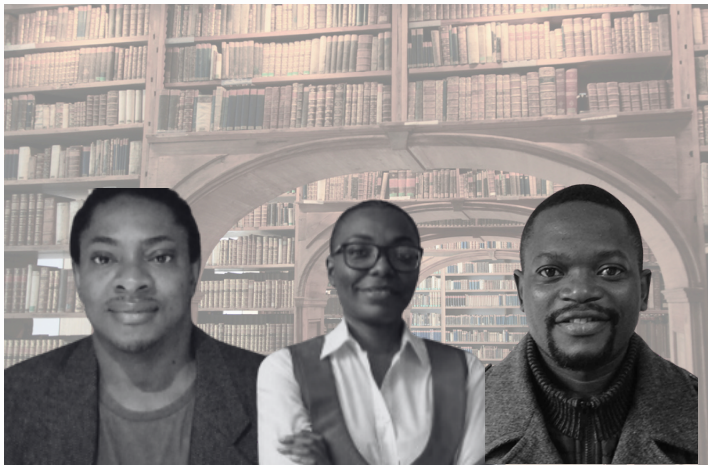
**This policy brief was funded by the Consulate
of the People's Republic of China in
Johannesburg.**





About our Policy Briefs:

The Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC) Policy Briefs are a series of reports from the Institute's research-based and policy-oriented seminars on relevant themes, intended for policy practitioners and decision makers in foreign policy, Pan-African issues, security, governance, aid and development. They aim to inform public debate and generate input into the sphere of policymaking. The perspectives expressed are outcomes from strategic engagements and those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute and the University of Johannesburg.



About the Authors:

Dr Chidochashe Nyere is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC). His research interests are as follows: decolonial studies, international relations, African politics, academic literacies and human rights.

Ms. Hellen Adogo is a Research Assistant at the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC). Her key research interests include Africa-China relations, African agency in international relations, and BRICS-Africa relations.

Dr Gideon Chitanga is a Researcher at the Centre for Africa China Studies, University of Johannesburg. His broader research interests include democracy in Africa, media, diplomacy, international relations and global affairs.



About the Institute

IPATC was established at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in 2016 as one of nine flagship centres of excellence to conduct research. It provides a forum for scholars, practitioners, and civil society actors across Africa and its Diaspora to dialogue and contribute to the rigorous production and dissemination of Pan-African knowledge and culture. The Institute seeks to promote original and innovative Pan-African ideas and critical dialogue in pursuit of global excellence in research and teaching, and to contribute actively to building an international profile for UJ on Pan-African issues.



