

China and Africa regional economic cooperation: History and prospects¹

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Abstract

The establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 was a further development of the traditional model of bilateral cooperation, and the starting point for China's multilateral cooperation with African countries. In recent years, China-Africa economic cooperation has been addressing new situations. In particular, under its initiative to "support the integration of Africa and help Africa improve its overall capacity for development", China has participated in a variety of areas concerning the economic integration of Africa, and it has received an active response from Africa. Based on a consideration of the history and current features of China-Africa economic cooperation, this article analyses the implications for the further development of China-Africa regional economic cooperation in the future. It concludes that there is need to enhance mutual trust, to strengthen investment in manufacturing and strategic industries, and to increase cooperation on infrastructure projects for African integration.

Keywords: Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, China-Africa economic cooperation, regional economic history, the economic integration of Africa

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Introduction: The history of China-Africa economic cooperation

The establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 marked a new era in economic relations between China and Africa. But it is important to recognize that contemporary China-Africa economic cooperation is rooted in a long history, and hence FOCAC stresses the historical links between China and Africa. Based on a consideration of the history and current features of China-Africa economic cooperation, this article analyses the implications for the further development of China-Africa regional economic cooperation in the future.

Economic exchanges between China and Africa can be traced back to the Han Dynasty, as evidenced by the imperial envoy Zhang Qian's reference to Li Xuan (now Alexandria in Egypt) after his return from the diplomatic mission to eastern Central Asia from 138 BC to 126 BC at the command of Emperor Wu (Sima, 2009). With the opening up of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty, silk fabrics from China were transported to Alexandria, the then economic and trade centre of the West, from where they were distributed all over the Roman Empire and the rest of Europe (Charlesworth, 1926). Indirect trade links were also established between China and such ancient African kingdoms as the Kingdom of Kush and the Kingdom of Aksum. From the mid-eighth century to the mid-ninth century, China-Africa trade was characterized by exchanges of ivory, rhino horns and spices from East Africa and silk and porcelain from China. It achieved prosperity, thanks to the frequent voyages of Arabian merchants between China and East Africa, and to the development of China's shipbuilding industry. During the four visits of Zheng He's fleet to the coastal states of East Africa between 1405 and 1433, free commercial trade was conducted between the fleet and local people. This accomplished the goal of tributary trade set by the Yongle Emperor Zhu Di which was characterized as "China's generous gifts and [meagre] rewards" and was intended to gain the gratitude and homage of far-away 'barbarian' states by demonstrating the grace and majesty of 'superior' China (Podell and Anzovin, 1993).

After China's prohibition of maritime trade and interaction with foreign countries during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, direct economic ties between China and Africa were interrupted. However, merchants on both sides kept indirect contact with each other. In more recent history, both China and Africa were subject to external invasions and bitter experiences and were reduced to third world status. Africa was subjected to the slave trade, while China suffered from both slavery and the trafficking of Chinese labourers. For example, at the beginning of the 16th century, hundreds of Chinese were kidnapped and trafficked by the Portuguese. After the establishment of the Cape Colony in 1652, a large number of Chinese were trafficked as slaves to South Africa by Dutch colonists.

The similar historical experiences of China and Africa ultimately brought the two sides together in the post-independence period. African states played an important role in voting for China to gain a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council in 1971. In return, China made great efforts to support the development of African countries. This is best exemplified by the large-scale aid provided by China, in spite of its own economic difficulties, for the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia railway between 1970 and 1975. The Tanzam Railway has promoted the economic development

and exchange of resources between the urban and rural areas of Tanzania and Zambia, with a lot of new towns springing up along the railway as political, economic and cultural centres of their respective districts.

Contemporary China-Africa economic cooperation

In the period after 1949 China-Africa economic cooperation was initially conducted according to the conventional practice in modern international relations that assumes that foreign affairs are conducted by the government of a nation-state. This is reflected in Article 57 of the Common Programme adopted by the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in September 1949 which stipulates that "The People's Republic of China may restore and develop commercial relations with foreign governments and peoples on a basis of equality and mutual benefit" (Xinhua Bookstore, 1949:41). Thus economic cooperation between China and Africa involved China undertaking single economic aid projects or signing agreements on economic and technical cooperation with individual African states. These bilateral agreements, which covered many areas and were targeted at specific projects, brought a lot of benefit to African states, whose economies, driven by the mining and oil industries, were improved. Some well-priced Chinese goods, such as agricultural machinery, hardware, small home appliances, stationery and sporting goods, gradually gained the favour of the African market. China-Africa bilateral trade began to undergo substantial growth, with total trade volume growing from US 177.21 million dollars in 1970 to US 11.9099 billion dollars in 1982, an increase of 672% (Wu, 1993, 42-43).

However, in the mid-to late 1980s, as Africa's foreign trade shrank due to its economic restructuring, bilateral trade between China and Africa suffered a decline as well. It was not until the late 1990s that economic and trade cooperation between the two sides regained its vitality. In October 2000 the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established as a mechanism for multilateral consultations and collective dialogue between China and Africa. This marked China's successful introduction of multilateral diplomacy into the handling of African affairs (Luo, 2006, p.25) as well as the beginning of a new stage for China-Africa relations. This stage is characterized by relations between a state (China) and a continent (Africa) and the rapid growth of economic and trade cooperation. In the decade from the establishment of FOCAC in 2000 to the tenth anniversary of the Forum in 2010, the total volume of China-Africa trade grew from U.S. 10.6 billion dollars to U.S. 126.9 billion dollars, with China becoming Africa's largest trading partner from 2009. Additionally, with China's total investment in Africa topping U.S. 1 billion dollars in 2010, Africa had become China's fourth largest investment destination.

In 2013, China began to implement three measures to strengthen China-Africa economic and trade cooperation that it had pledged at the fifth FOCAC Ministerial Conference in 2012. These were: a) to expand cooperation in investment and financing; b) to expand development assistance to Africa; and c) to support the economic integration of Africa. The U.S. 20 billion dollars financing plan was implemented and loan agreements have been signed in such areas as infrastructure, agriculture, manufacturing, and the development of

middle and small-sized enterprises. In addition, aid projects such as agro-technology demonstration centres were implemented. During his visit to Africa in 2014, the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang expressed China's intention to further enhance its economic cooperation with Africa in such areas as roads, railways, ports, sea lanes, electric power, and transportation, in order to improve the living standards of African people and promote the sustained economic growth of Africa.

Meanwhile, both the amount and forms of China-Africa trade are constantly being expanded and optimized. Since the late 1950s and early 1960s when China successively established diplomatic relations with African states, China-Africa trade has undergone the following phases: the clearing accounting trade phase, the barter trade phase, the dual-track spot exchange trade phaseⁱⁱ, and the current phase with spot exchange trade as the main form of trade. As of the end of 2012, China had signed bilateral investment protection agreements with 32 African states, and established the mechanism of a Joint Economic and Trade Commission with 45 African states. It had made an actual investment of U.S. 1.806 billion dollars into 53 projects as part of the planned investment of U.S. 2.385 billion dollars into 61 projects in 30 African states through the China-Africa Development Fund, one of the Eight Measures announced by President Hu Jintao at the FOCAC Beijing Summit of 2006. According to preliminary estimates, the ultimate implementation of all the planned investment programmes will spur an investment of more than U.S. 10 billion dollars in Africa, bringing an annual increase of local exports of about U.S. 2 billion dollars and benefiting more than 70 million people (People's Republic of China, 2013).

As the structure of China-Africa trade continues to be optimized, products with comparative advantage from each side gradually enter the market of the other side. From the 1980s to the 1990s, China's exports to Africa comprised mainly light industrial products, food, chemical products and animal by-products. Since 2000, there has been a significant increase in the exports of mechanical and electrical products such as machinery, automobiles, and electronics, whose quality and technical content has also been greatly improved. At present, China's export of mechanical and electrical products accounts for more than 50% of its total exports to Africa. Similarly, Africa's exports to China, which once comprised mainly primary products such as cotton and phosphate, now include manufactured goods such as steel and electronics. Meanwhile, Africa's agricultural exports to China are enjoying an accelerated growth, with Chinese consumers gradually becoming familiar with specialties from different regions of Africa, such as citrus from Egypt, wine from South Africa, cocoa beans from Ghana, coffee from Uganda, olive oil from Tunisia, and sesame from Ethiopia. Though China's overall imports from Africa in 2009 declined due to the international financial crisis, its imports of agricultural products grew by 25% (People's Republic of China, 2010).

It can be argued that the expanded economic and trade relations between China and Africa have promoted, in varying degrees, the economic development of Africa. The rich natural resources in Africa have been more fully utilized and, in a broader sense, the world has rediscovered the prospects of Africa's market and the potential of Africa's economic development. This was reflected in two noteworthy cover stories on the development of Africa published in *The Economist*. The first, published in 2000, was

entitled “The hopeless continent”, whilst the second one, published in 2011, had the title “The hopeful continent: Africa rising”. Furthermore, for two consecutive years (2012 and 2013), half of the world's 10 fastest growing states were in Africa. The natural endowments of Africa (which has been called the world's cornucopia) are being transformed into productivity, with markets surging and foreign direct investment steadily increasing (Liu, 2014).

Economic cooperation between China and African regional organizations

Nowadays, as regional organizations have become important development actors and regional cooperation mechanisms in various forms are under continuous improvement, regional and sub-regional cooperation organizations in Africa are also in the process of maturing. The multi-level cooperation between China and Africa, which consists of bilateral cooperation, sub-regional cooperation, and trans-regional cooperation, has not only become an important part of the South-South cooperation, but also an important component of cross-regional cooperation in the current world, increasingly demonstrating its vitality (Yang, 2011).

A case in point is the rapid development of relations between China and the African Union (AU), the largest regional organization in Africa. These relations have a solid foundation laid down during the nearly 40 years of interaction between China and the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and they reflect the increasing need for cooperation between China and Africa. While on the one hand the AU has been consistent in its firm support of China, on the other hand China has attached great importance to the influence and role of Africa in the handling of regional and international affairs. China has added weight to the active role of the AU by supporting it in international multilateral meetings, and by opposing any attempt by Western states to resolve African issues through sanctions and military intervention. Furthermore, since there is no problem of trade imbalance in the China-AU relationship, such as exists in the relationship between China and a number of individual African states, it is easier to have good relations between the two sides, which are related more to macro and strategic matters. Since 2002, China sent high-level officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to attend AU summits as envoys of the Chinese government. In 2005, China appointed a representative to the AU, making it among the first non-African states to appoint their representatives to the AU. In recent years, through frequent exchanges with the AU Commission and its Chairperson, China has gradually promoted the institutionalization of exchanges between the two sides. China has expressed its support for the AU's important role in maintaining regional peace and stability and promoting the unity and development of Africa, which was mentioned at the 2006 FOCAC Beijing Summit as well as in *China's Africa Policy* released in 2006 (People's Republic of China, 2006). In November 2008, the China-AU Strategic Dialogue was officially launched and the second dialogue was held in September 2009. In recent years, China has maintained an annual contribution of over U.S. 1 million dollars to the AU mainly to support the AU's capacity building and peacekeeping operations in Darfur of Sudan and Somalia. In 2011, the project to build the AU Conference Centre, the largest aid project of China in recent years, was completed.

Additionally, China has expanded its cooperation with sub-regional organizations in Africa, all of which are integral parts of the AU, namely the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), the East African Community, and the Economic Community of West African States. In 2002, Wei Jianguo, Vice Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, attended the SADC Annual Consultative Conference and delivered a speech at the closing ceremony on behalf of all international partners. In 2004, China started Free Trade Area negotiations with the Southern African Customs Union. In 2007, China dispatched a special envoy to SADC and the China-SADC dialogue mechanism was established. Perhaps the most significant landmark event was the signing of a Framework Agreement on economy, trade, investment and technical cooperation between China and the East African Community in November 2011. This was the first economic and trade cooperation mechanism established between China and an African sub-regional organization, in accordance with which the two sides will continue cooperation on four aspects, namely, trade facilitation, investment expansion, cross-border infrastructure construction, and development aid. In October 2012, an economic and trade cooperation mechanism was established through the united efforts of China and the Economic Community of West African States to strengthen their overall planning, give full play to their respective advantages, expand and deepen their cooperation in various fields in a larger scope, and achieve greater progress and prosperity for their economic and social development. If previous China-Africa cooperation was conducted mainly in the form of bilateral economic and trade cooperation, it is clear that China is now expanding and deepening China-Africa relations through its cooperation with African regional organizations.

The current features of China-Africa regional economic cooperation

Government-led cooperation

The positive results of the China-Africa economic and trade cooperation have been achieved through the great importance attached to it by the Chinese government. Since 1998, increasing importance has been attached to China-Africa investment cooperation by the Chinese government, which has made a succession of promotion policies and safeguard policies. In 1998, the State Planning Commission decided upon the planning scheme for China's investment in Africa, in which was given a quantitative analysis of the scope, scale, and targets of China's investment in Africa. In the late 1990s, the Chinese government launched the "going out" strategy, by which overseas investment by Chinese enterprises would be encouraged and supported. In 2000, FOCAC was established, providing a mechanism for China-Africa investment cooperation. In 2006, China released the paper entitled *China's Africa Policy*. In 2009 at FOCAC further attention was given to China's investment in Africa. In 2013, China managed to establish the China-Africa partnership for the purpose of deepening the construction of Africa's cross-border (i.e. regional) infrastructure. In doing this, it was able to build a platform for further cooperation between China and the AU. Not only did it sign an agreement with the AU Commission on Conducting Cooperation on the Construction

of African Cross-border Infrastructure, but it also set up a joint working group. During his visit to Africa in 2013, President Xi Jinping put forward the principles of “sincerity, real results, affinity and good faith” and the idea that “China and Africa are a community of common destiny”, while in 2014, Premier Li Keqiang built an updated version of China-Africa cooperation by putting forward the “461 cooperation framework”.ⁱⁱⁱ

The importance attached by the Chinese Government to investment cooperation has promoted the bilateral cooperation between the two sides, and provided not only a safeguard at the policy level, but also a good platform and opportunity for diversified bilateral economic exchanges. In June 2007, in order to stimulate and facilitate Chinese investments in Africa and give an increasing role to Chinese enterprises in African investment cooperation, China established the China-Africa Development Fund, with an initial funding of U.S. 1 billion dollars provided by China Development Bank. The following procedure has to be followed if the Chinese government agrees to support a cross-regional project of the AU by making an investment. The Chinese Government initiates an independent bid open to all competent Chinese enterprises. The winner(s) of the bid then complete the project. For example, in the bidding and construction of the Grand Inga Hydropower Project in the DRC, the landmark structure symbolizing the integration of Africa, winners of the competitive bid included both private and state-owned enterprises, which then completed the funding and construction process in collaboration with each other. In this way, not only had the commitment of the Chinese Government been fulfilled, but also the funding and investing process had been accelerated and the economic benefits for the DRC maximized. At the same time, various institutions, such as relevant government bodies for guidance and supervision, investment funds, banks, and other multilateral financial institutions, may also participate in China’s investment in Africa, forming a variety of investment forms which may include investment by a sole investor, joint ventures, joint stock, and mergers and acquisitions. In 2012, the China Development Bank, in collaboration with the Development Bank of Southern Africa, further expanded cooperation between China and Africa by taking a combination of approaches such as financing and project loans.

Investment in the project contracting market

By fully exploiting the driving force of investment as well as the comprehensive benefits of investment projects, China-Africa economic and trade cooperation is expanding. This has fuelled not only China’s investment in Africa but also the growth of the project contracting industry. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese investment in Africa has maintained rapid growth on a year-on-year basis. In 2010, China’s non-direct investment flow reached U.S. 2.1 billion dollars, 40 times more than in 2001, while its direct investment stock amounted to U.S. 13.04 billion dollars, accounting for 4.1% of the total investment stock. In 2012, China’s total investment in Africa exceeded U.S. 15 billion U.S. dollars and was expected to exceed U.S. 500 billion dollars during the Twelfth Five-Year Plan period. Africa has become one of the emerging overseas investment destinations for Chinese enterprises, with more than

2000 Chinese enterprises having started businesses in Africa, covering areas such as agriculture, telecommunications, energy, manufacturing, and catering services (Ministry of Commerce of China, 2012). China's growing investment in Africa has an obvious pull effect. In 2000, the contract value and business turnover for China's contracting projects in Africa were respectively U.S. 2.08 billion dollars and U.S. 1.1 billion dollars while those in 2009 amounted to U.S. 43.99 billion dollars and U.S. 28.44 billion dollars. From 2000 to 2009, the completed volume of China's contracting projects in Africa grew nearly 25 times (Yang et al, 2013). China has an important position in the African project contracting market. Currently, the number of Chinese enterprises in the African project contracting market has accounted for one third of that in the whole overseas project contracting market over the same period, making Africa the second largest overseas project contracting market for Chinese enterprises. This is undoubtedly significant for contemporary Africa which seeks to promote industrialization and regional integration at the same time. This process involves the complementary advantages for China, which has abundant funding and mature industry, technologies and equipment, and for Africa which has rich natural resources, huge markets, and low labour costs. It enables the possibility for a transfer to Africa of some of Chinese industrial chains with comparative advantage, which can further promote investment in Africa, the integration of trade, and the improvement of modernized regional industrial and supply chains.

Participation in the African interconnection programme for regional integration

Infrastructure is one of China's fields of comparative advantage as well as one of the priority development fields determined by Africa. In an effort to meet its great need in infrastructure development in the process of industrialization, urbanization, and regional integration, in 2012 the African Union agreed on the *Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa* (PIDA) as a strategic framework for the period up to 2040 (African Union, 2012). Through PIDA, the African Union aims to achieve interconnection across the whole continent in terms of transportation, energy, information communications, and waterways. The programme, which will cost hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars, has attracted the attention and interest of international investors. The areas covered by the PIDA are some of China's areas of international comparative advantage and of common interest to China and Africa, so that the two sides have a huge potential for cooperation in these areas. It is especially so because China established the China-Africa partnership on trans-national and trans-regional infrastructure construction in 2012, signifying that this cooperation was part of its effort to build a new type of China-Africa strategic partnership. The partnership was established to render support in project planning and feasibility study, to encourage capable Chinese enterprises and financial institutions to assist African countries with the improvement of facilities for customs and commodity inspection, and to support trade facilitation. Specific tasks of the cooperation partnership include preparatory work such as consulting, planning, feasibility studies, and scheme design regarding interconnection projects and resource surveys; to train and cultivate 300 management and technical talents in various areas concerning infrastructure construction;

appropriate part of the U.S. 20 billion dollars loan to Africa for infrastructure construction projects (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2012).

In fact, under Africa's current economic situation where all-around development is under way and new growth points and potential growth areas are being constantly generated, there is considerable potential for bilateral cooperation in broad areas such as the information and communication industry, the construction of railway networks, air transportation and coastal shipping, which are not only Africa's emerging strategic industries but also China's strong industries with comparative advantage.

Challenges related to the China-Africa economic cooperation

The promotion of comprehensive economic cooperation between China and Africa has become one of the most important driving forces of development in Africa. In some way, the discussions between China and the West on the priority issues of global development relating to Africa, such as the relationship between economic development and environmental protection, sustainability of growth, and the relationship between economic development, political democracy and human rights, have greatly improved the status of Africa in the current hierarchy of the world. However, it cannot be denied that due to differences in culture, language, and regulatory systems, Chinese investors in Africa are faced with various challenges regarding issues of corporate social responsibility, labour relations and environmental protection. Such problems have to be dealt with. Thus to deepen the China-Africa strategic partnership in the contemporary situation, the two sides must strengthen their political mutual trust and strategic consensus, address problems and further enhance the quality of their cooperation.

Conclusion: Future prospects for the China–Africa regional economic cooperation

In the light of the analysis presented in this article, it is clear that the potential for further positive regional economic cooperation between China and Africa is very strong although there are problems of mutual trust. It is recommended that future cooperation addresses problem areas and takes into account the two key areas of focus identified below.

The need to strengthen investment in manufacturing industry and emerging strategic industries

The manufacturing industry is the cornerstone of the economy. China has, for a long time, been investing in the manufacturing industry in Africa. It is beneficial to both China and Africa to link the industrial and supply chains of Africa with those of China, to further strengthen the derivation of China's industrial lines with comparative advantages, and to extend the value-added chains of African-made products. The growing internal consumer demand of Africa should also be taken into consideration by Chinese investment enterprises, which should pay more attention to the development and cultivation of African markets and target their investment in much needed products

and relevant services in Africa.

At the same time, under Africa's current economic situation of comprehensive development with new growth points and strong demand in various areas, there is a lot of room for the construction and upgrading of infrastructure, as well as business opportunities in such areas as information and communication industry, the construction of railway networks, air transportation, and coastal shipping. These emerging strategic industries are important for African economic development and worthy of attention and investment from relevant departments of the Chinese government and Chinese enterprises.

The need to increase involvement in interconnection projects and accelerate the integration of Africa

Different financing methods and portfolios should be combined, especially through Chinese enterprises entering into joint ventures with African stakeholders, so as to better suit the development needs of Africa, facilitate communication and adjustments, and reduce risks by sharing interests and responsibilities.

Studies on the planning and projects concerning African infrastructure development should be strengthened for Chinese enterprises to engage in large-scale strategic projects on African infrastructure development. The advantages of capable Chinese enterprises, including those with respect to capital, technology, and management, should be maximized so that they can play a role in promoting the integration of Africa.

With regard to China's cooperation with African regional organizations, the channels of African regional organizations should be fully utilized to establish trans-national and cross-regional partnerships on African infrastructure development. Besides, efforts should be made to provide support to such preparatory work as consulting, planning, feasibility studies and scheme design relating to interconnection projects as well as training and developing management and technical talents in various areas concerning African infrastructure construction. In addition, Chinese enterprises and financial institutions should be encouraged to participate in both the construction and the operations management of African trans-national and cross-regional infrastructure by combining various approaches such as financing, aid and cooperation.

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ⁱⁱ The dual-track spot exchange trade is a special policy adopted in the early 1980s. A certain percentage of foreign currencies earned through international trade should be sold to the government at a low official exchange rate, while the remaining part can be exchanged at higher market rates.

ⁱⁱⁱ The "461 cooperation framework" refers to the proposal put forward by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in his speech delivered at the AU Conference Centre in May 5, 2014. It consists of adhering to 4

principles: treat each other with full sincerity and as complete equals, enhance solidarity and mutual trust, jointly pursue inclusive development and innovate on practical cooperation. It involves promoting major projects in 6 areas to upgrade mutual cooperation: industrial cooperation, financial cooperation projects, poverty reduction, ecological and environmental protection, cultural and people-to-people exchanges, peace and security. It focuses on one important platform to deepen China-Africa relationship: FOCAC.

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