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Global Players in Africa: Is there scope for an EU-China-Africa partnership?

International relations are undergoing profound change with newly emerging powers entering the scene. The European Union is itself an “emerging” foreign policy actor, hoping to reinforce its political influence in order to match its weight as global development actor. Against the backdrop of a proliferation of global actors in the 21st century, China’s emerging presence in Africa challenges Western approaches, offering new opportunities for African governments to diversify their development partners. This paper gives some insights on how Europe can better cooperate with emerging donors to promote Africa’s development and analyses some of the main opportunities and challenges for African countries.

China in Africa

Bilateral relations between China and various African countries are not new. For several decades, there were strong political and ideological ties deriving from the African liberation movements. A “South-South cooperation” materialised in thousands of scholarships to African students and also in major construction projects, such as the national parliaments or stadiums of many African countries. In fact, the so-called “new” donor countries have a long history of development cooperation and this term is currently applied mainly because these countries – such as China, India or Brazil – have adopted an independent approach to aid that does not fit within western standards or institutions (e.g. DAC/OECD).¹

The exponential growth of the Chinese presence and influence in Africa over the past few years has led to a renewed interest in these relations, namely due to the consequences these will undoubtedly have in the international system and in traditional donors’ approaches towards Africa. This growing presence is also having a crucial impact in Africa because it offers African countries the potential to take advantage of the counterweight offered by Chinese development cooperation, as well as other South-South cooperation, potentially gaining more ‘policy space’ and wielding greater leverage in bargaining with both traditional and emerging donors.

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¹ For a more detailed analysis on the role of emerging countries and South-South cooperation, see *New Donors: China’s Africa Policy as a prime example*, Development Policy Briefing 02/07, Swiss Agency for Cooperation and Development.

Growing Chinese engagement in the African continent is part of a wider reality that is linked to the affirmation of China as a global player. Its “going global” strategy and its economic growth has led to a greater demand in international markets for energy and raw materials, providing commercial opportunities for countries with export patterns that meet Chinese needs, especially African countries. While China is still a modest commercial player in some sectors, its weight is undoubtedly growing. The flow of goods between China and Africa has increased by more than five times since 2000, it imports 30% of its oil from the African continent and it has been, since 2006, the third trading partner for Africa after the US and France. By the end of 2007, the Chinese Import-Export Bank had approved a total of US\$ 23.9 billion in loans to Africa.

As its economic strength grows, China is gradually scaling up development assistance to African countries. In the 2006 Sino-African Summit, China announced huge assistance programmes and approved the Beijing Plan of Action for the period 2007-2009², which will certainly transform China into the largest financing actor of infrastructures in the African continent. In fact, most Chinese investment in Africa is directed towards large infrastructure projects, often linked to developing trade in energy, minerals, metals and other primary commodities. Investment has increased significantly in such resource-rich countries as Angola, Chad, DRC, Gabon, Nigeria, Sudan and Zambia. Much of this investment is motivated by diplomatic and economic self-interest – the drive to secure vital resources, open new markets, widen investment opportunities and forge new political alliances. But, has the history of Western intervention in Africa been very different from this?

Despite the importance of these statistics, these numbers are not the main issue; the central aspect that must be considered is how Chinese involvement is changing the parameters by which Africa relates to the West, and the way the West approaches African partners. Most of the research tends to sway between extreme positions, presenting China as an opportunity for economic growth in Africa or as threat to democracy and to the proclaimed ‘western values’. However, research fails to focus on what Africans themselves think about Chinese engagement, benefits and challenges.

China’s aid and investment is in many ways more attractive to African countries than those of traditional western partners. It offers faster implementation of programmes in comparison with the western unfulfilled promises of scaling up aid to Africa. the combination of “South-South cooperation” rhetoric with the African perception that China understands Africa’s development needs better; and the absence of “moral judgements” in setting, for example, high governance benchmarks. *that in practice undermine aid delivery*. It is estimated that economic growth has risen between one and two percent due to Chinese involvement, and this cannot be negligible in a context of international crisis and African marginalisation in the world market economy.

² Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC): *Beijing Action Plan 2007-2009*. Available at: www.fmprc.gov.cn/zflt/eng/zyzl/hywj/t280369.htm

Box 1: China's pledges (2006-2009)

1. Double its 2006 assistance to Africa by 2009
2. Provide US\$3 billion of preferential loans and US\$2 billion of preferential buyer's credits to Africa in the next three years
3. Set up a China–Africa development fund, which would reach US\$5 billion, to encourage Chinese companies to invest in Africa and provide support to them
4. Cancel debt in the form of all the interest-free government loans that matured at the end of 2005 owed by the heavily indebted poor countries and the least developed countries in Africa that have diplomatic relations with China
5. Increase from 190 to over 440 the number of export items to China receiving zero-tariff treatment from the least developed countries in Africa with diplomatic ties with China.
6. Establish three to five trade and economic cooperation zones in Africa in the next three years.
7. Over the next three years, train 15,000 African professionals; send 100 senior agricultural experts to Africa; set up 10 special agricultural technology demonstration centres in Africa; build 30 hospitals in Africa and provide a grant of RMB 300 million for providing artemisinin² and build 30 malaria prevention and treatment centres to fight malaria in Africa; dispatch 300 youth volunteers to Africa; build 100 rural schools in Africa; and increase the number of Chinese government scholarships to African students from the current 2,000 per year to 4,000 per year by 2009.

In this context, 2009 will certainly be an opportunity to evaluate the results of the commitments made in 2006 (see box 1). The challenge is, as always, how to manage the growth in a way that has real impact on peoples' lives, since a win-win partnership for governments does not always mean a win-win for their people. In fact, the question is not so much if Africa benefits from Chinese engagement, but rather which Africans, which sectors, and under which circumstances these benefits occur.³

Analysis should therefore focus on approaches more than on statistics, because it is only the latter that currently determines most contemporary perceptions about Chinese involvement in Africa. For many African elites, Chinese pragmatic investments, trade relations and economic cooperation instruments are a signal that China views them as attractive economic partners, rather than the "paternalistic" or "charity" approach that western donors tend to have towards their poor African partners. Furthermore, political conditionalities are perceived in several African sectors as a manifestation of interference in sovereignty and internal affairs, or as a neo-colonial imposition. Therefore, the very different Chinese stance of highlighting equality of partnership as a principle and development as a priority - with no other political considerations - tends to be most welcome in many African countries, whether they are democratic regimes or not. In other words, there is no psychological bias against China and this is reflected in African attitudes towards China.

³ Wild, L.; Mephram, D. (eds) (2006): *The New Sinosphere – China in Africa*. Institute for Public Policy Research.

Beyond these perceptions, there are practical reasons for Europe's decreasing influence. The "demanding approach," in which aid is tied to reforms that the African countries are, in most cases, not able to implement, has raised the transaction costs to the point that it is impossible for African governments to prefer EU's aid and investment to Chinese aid and investment. There is also a very pragmatic supplier-provider relationship. China needs oil and raw materials as well as new markets; Africa needs new and better roads, schools, telecom networks and power generation, which have opened a lucrative window of opportunity for Chinese companies. Some studies suggest that Chinese aid and investment are also more flexible, take a longer-term perspective and are faster in execution, since they are not dependent on heavy bureaucratic procedures, such as those of the European institutions.

In this regard, Chinese approaches also benefits from the so-called 'aid fatigue' that has reached Africa and traditional donors since the 1990s. With development aid showing poor results in influencing economic growth in most developing countries, the Chinese practice of integrating development policy within a more comprehensive package with diversified instruments such as investment, trade and credit lines, rather than treating development as an independent policy field, tends to be a more effective approach to complex and long-term development challenges.

Nevertheless, there are also some negative side effects of Chinese involvement in Africa that are becoming increasingly evident to Africans. First, the credit lines and low-interest loans, although with very favourable terms, can be a factor in creating indebtedness in the long-term. Secondly, the environmental and working conditions in Chinese-run companies do not respect international standards and can, therefore, have a negative impact on African competitiveness and international credibility. Thirdly, the widespread use of Chinese workers in African projects can undermine local industry and has no positive impact in reducing local unemployment. It is now clear in some regions throughout the continent that most local small and medium companies or industries will not survive in the face of competition from Chinese products, particularly textiles and clothing. The phenomenon of immigrant Chinese entrepreneurs and labour force migration from China to Africa can create social tensions, as has already become evident in Zambia and Namibia.

Furthermore, although China has committed itself to the universal values of democracy, rule of law and human rights, there are contradictions between China's proclaimed standards and its pragmatic political interests, as in Darfur and Zimbabwe. The "non-interference approach" is becoming unsustainable for the Chinese themselves, because the success of investments is very much linked to political and security conditions. The killing of Chinese oil workers by rebels in Ethiopia's Ogaden region⁴ has drawn Beijing's attention to the importance of security and for the need to take more responsibility in Africa. Likewise, if Chinese 'soft power' has worked in Angola or the Sudan, where the states' elites hold control over the access to oil sources, the same approach may not be sufficient in countries like Nigeria, where the control over the Niger Delta is increasingly questioned by social and economic groups. Therefore, "non-interference" does not mean inaction, neither in bilateral nor in multilateral institutions.

⁴ Nine Chinese workers and at least 65 Ethiopians were killed in April 2007, when Ogaden guerrillas attacked an oil installation in Eastern Ethiopia. A number of anti-Chinese riots have also occurred in other African countries.

EU and China

The EU-China relationship has been marked by periods of high expectations followed by disillusion and increased scepticism of the feasibility of a real partnership⁵. The institutionalisation of EU-China Annual Summits since 1998 has contributed to upgrade the level of political dialogue and has produced some important strategic approaches, namely regarding external relations with other regions of the world (see box 2).

Box 2: Regarding Africa.....Some EU-China official statements:

Joint Statement of the 10th China-EU Summit

Beijing, 28 November 2007

“9. Leaders gave a positive assessment of the progress made by Africa in the fields of peace and development and of the efforts of African countries and the African Union in promoting African integration. They reiterated their commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and global sustainable development in a balanced and coordinated way.

Leaders recalled the successful cooperation since the last Summit, at all levels, in the efforts of the international community to facilitate a solution to the Darfur crisis and underlined the need to make further progress as regards the Darfur peace negotiations as well as the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The leaders expressed the objective to see the Africa Union/UN hybrid peace keeping operation UNAMID soon to be deployed; they noted the progress in preparation of the operation MINURCAT and EUFOR Chad/RCA recalling the common aim of contributing to peace and stability in Darfur and the neighbouring regions.

10. Leaders welcomed more practical cooperation by the two sides through their respective existing cooperation mechanisms with Africa, such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the EU-Africa Summit, so as to contribute to Africa's peace, stability and sustainable development on the basis of equality and mutual benefit. The two sides agreed to continue their dialogue on African issues, and actively explore effective ways and channels of cooperation among China, the EU and Africa in appropriate areas. The EU invited China to attend the EU-Africa Summit as an observer. China invited the EU Commissioner for Development to visit China”

EU-China: Closer partners, growing responsibilities (COM(2006)0631)

Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, 2006

“Closer co-operation on international development issues would benefit the EU, China and partners in the developing world. There are significant downsides if we are not able to co-ordinate effectively, particularly in Africa but also in other developing countries. The EU and China should:

- engage in a structured dialogue on Africa's sustainable development. There should be transparency on the activity and priorities of both sides, providing a basis for full discussion;

⁵ For an in-depth analysis of EU-China relations in recent years, see NEVES, Miguel Santos (2007): *Recent Trends in EU-China Relations and future prospects: partners or competitors in the context of glocalization?* IEEI, June 2007.

- support regional efforts to improve governance in Africa;
- explore opportunities for improving China's integration into international efforts to improve aid efficiency, co-ordination and opportunities for practical bilateral co-operation on the ground".

"The EU and China have an interest in promoting peace and security through a reformed and effective multilateral system. They should co-operate closely in the framework of the UN, working to find multilateral solutions to emerging crises, and to combat terrorism and increase regional co-operation, including through involvement by both in emerging regional structures. This common interest, in strong multilateralism, peace and security should also be reflected in closer co-operation and more structured dialogue on the Middle East, Africa and East Asia, and on cross-cutting challenges such as non-proliferation".

EU-China relations have changed dramatically over the past few years, becoming more diversified and vital for both partners. China exerts a growing influence on the European economy, becoming the EU's first source of goods imports and also its first source of foreign trade deficit. The two powers are simultaneously partners and competitors. Cultural distance and structural political differences persist between the EU and China in many areas. Therefore, the two players need to make a mutual effort in order to identify common interests and areas of convergence from which to build upon.

Several documents and declarations underline the EU's wish to further intensify its comprehensive engagement with China, but at the same time stress that the country's stronger influence and position in the world goes hand-in-hand with increased responsibilities and expectations. Human rights and support to non-democratic regimes remains one of the most fracturing issues, namely regarding Chinese policy in Africa. In the beginning of 2008, EU parliamentarians produced a report which stated that, rather than ensure neutrality, China's policy of "trade only, no politics" in Africa provides some dictators with the political and financial support to stay in power. It also says China is responsible for significant arms transfers to conflict-ridden countries, even in violation of UN embargoes in the cases of Darfur, Liberia and the DRC⁶. But it fails to recognise Europe's own flaws, such as a mixed practice regarding democracy and dictatorial regimes in Africa, double standards on human rights violations, lack of capacity and political will to directly intervene in African conflicts, etc⁷. In sum, many of the criticisms made against China mirror, to a certain extent, Western mistakes, and therefore should not be subject to a "blame game" between EU and China.

As a developing country, China benefits from European aid programmes. This situation seems paradoxical due to the fact that China is Europe's main source of trade deficit. Chinese growth, then, can also represent an opportunity for engaging more in joint ventures inside China, as well as for an increased Chinese cooperation with European donors in other regions of the world, namely in Africa. The future could bring the promotion of joint project financing, with particular attention to areas which constitute joint priorities, such as energy efficiency, infrastructures, education and health services.

⁶ European Parliament resolution of 23 April 2008 on *China's policy and its effects on Africa* (2007/2555(INI))

⁷ See, for instance, *How Europe Lost Africa*, Dominic Johnson, Spiegel Online, 28-02-2008. www.spiegel.de

EU-China-Africa: Difficulties and Opportunities for Cooperation

The differences between the potential partners are stark. China is the largest developing country, Africa has the most less-developed countries grouped together, and the EU is the regional organisation with the highest number of developed countries grouped together. In a multilateral and interdependent world, the linkages between processes and events are rising and demand new approaches and partnerships, in order to address global challenges. China's projects can learn from greater European experience on quality standards, environmental and social practices, or corporate responsibility. EU Member States can draw on Chinese experience on how to create synergies between aid, commercial credits and investment. In fact, because of the increased Chinese presence, the EU may be rediscovering Africa. On the African side, additional cooperation partners and opportunities for greater cooperation are obviously welcomed, provided that these partners share the goal of contributing to sustainable and stable development.

Former French President Jacques Chirac summarised the benefits of the Chinese emerging presence in Africa as follows: "It is good for China, Africa and Europe, because in this process China has gained room to develop itself, Africa has got new investment and Europe has been stimulated to be competitive"⁸. Therefore, working in partnership to help achieve common objectives and in mutual benefit seems a reasonable thing to do. However, besides the formal statements, so far there is only little coordination between China and Europe concerning development aid and international activities for Africa.

Development, peace and political stability are common concerns for the three parties. However, how to contribute to an open and fruitful dialogue between such different players seems to be rather challenging, due to several factors:

- Different models of development, divergences in interests, perceptions and definitions in bilateral and multilateral relations, among the three partners. Particularly between China and Europe there are huge differences of approach: while China prefers bilateral relations (with almost no coordination concerns with other donors) and focuses its action on business and mutual economic benefits, EU is increasingly involved in coordination and harmonisation processes, with a development aid approach still very much linked to donor-recipient dynamics and to conditionalities.
- EU and China relations on African issues can be affected by difficulties arising in EU-China relations in general, regarding human rights and governance issues, divergent foreign policy priorities, amongst others (the cancellation by the Chinese of the EU-China annual Summit in 2008 being a case in point). As François Godement states, Europe is "trapped between the unavailability of positive engagement and its many goals for a partnership (with China) and frustration over the lack of progress in the realm of human rights, judicial and legal cooperation. There is no perfect answer to this dilemma."⁹

⁸ Chirac says China-Africa cooperation benefits Europe, ChinaView, 12-12-2007

⁹ Godement, François; *The EU and China: a necessary partnership. In Developing the external action of the European union, new instruments and global players*. Presidency of the European union, Portugal 2007.

- EU and Africa have complex institutional architectures which makes this dialogue very challenging to manage. Furthermore searching for common ground will not be easy as it also depends on coordination among Europeans. Despite the “europeanisation trend”, Member States still prefer bilateral channels to address some important issues. For instance, there are still important divisions between EU Member States with respect to human rights vis à vis the importance of economic bilateral relations with China. Likewise, China is not a homogenous entity, as it is many times perceived, but rather a heterogeneous group of various actors such as the government, state enterprises, private companies and citizens’ initiatives.
- China is more favourable to bilateral dialogue and tends to perceive multilateral initiatives for aid harmonisation and cooperation as western-driven (e.g. OECD, Paris Declaration). In other words, the benefits for China to engage in a trilateral dialogue are not clear for China’s foreign policy and global endeavour.
- Africa may be more interested in negotiating with both partners bilaterally for its own benefit, diversifying partnerships and not ‘putting all its eggs in the same basket’.
- Europe can be trapped in North-centric discourse and may give into the temptation of presenting itself as the “best model”, the actor that defends good universal values such as democracy, that fights for the respect of human rights and that has a more sustainable approach towards development. However, as stated by Manji and Marks (2007), the “relatively simple aspiration to normalise China into these initiatives of governance reform could easily slip into a strategy of co-opting China into the bigger game of ‘humanising neo-liberal globalisation in Africa’, instead of addressing the issues of a genuine governance reform favourable to Africans”.¹⁰

Against this background, one can point out several recommendations and opportunities for enhanced cooperation:

- Ensure that there is reciprocity in mutual pledges and commitments, and that strategic documents are fully adopted by the three parties of the intended partnership. The European Commission Communication, issued in late 2008, on trilateral cooperation with China and Africa¹¹, is a positive first step but also a development-oriented instrument. It establishes four sectors for collaboration: infrastructure, agriculture, sustainable management of natural resources and security, which have to be explained and discussed with Chinese and African partners. Not trying to impose European models and views, as well as avoiding over-simplifications and generalisations about China’s role in Africa, is crucial to ensure a fruitful dialogue among players.
- Invest more in a mutual understanding and learning process among partners, namely analysing African perspectives towards China and Europe’s engagement in the continent, as well as how these two players mutually perceive their Africa policies, as essential to building a constructive dialogue.

¹⁰ *African Perspectives on China in Africa*, Firoze Manji and Stephen Marks (eds), Fahamu, 2007

¹¹ EC (2008): *The EU, Africa and China: Towards trilateral dialogue and cooperation*. Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, COM(2008) 654. For an analysis of the document, see for instance Holstag, J.: *A Paper Tiger for Africa*, Asia Briefing, BICCS www.vub.ac.be/biccs

- Encourage African partners to take the lead in the trilateral dialogue. This means that Africans themselves have to discuss their perceptions on Chinese engagement and to formulate their own strategy towards China, which will contribute to enhancing the reciprocal nature of relations between the two parties. It also means that the approach has to change within African institutions, from reacting and responding to externally driven policies to a more pro-active approach. On the one hand, it is important to invest in domestic reforms that meet the external challenges, namely reforming the overall industrial architecture and the continued reliance on extractive industries and raw materials and, on the other hand, to define conditions of external actions, through fair deals and proper management of the capital generated. This can be done by imposing the respect for some fundamental rules and priorities for external actions: investment in productive sectors, creation of local employment, respect for environmental and labour standards. In this regard, “it should be standard practice for African states to insist that foreign investors put together a package of ‘tie-in’ projects that meet local development goals, including technology transfer and skills development” (Alden, 2006), strengthening this institutional capacity is certainly an opportunity for EU support to better governance in Africa.
- China’s approach is almost exclusively bilateral and has failed in deepening its cooperation with African regional organisations. This provides an opportunity for trilateral cooperation, since the EU is very much engaged in regional and continental processes, namely by supporting the African Peace and Security Architecture, and by strengthening the regional economic communities, etc.
- There are also some signs of China’s willingness to engage further in some multilateral initiatives (e.g. observer in DAC initiatives). Engaging China to participate in regional and multilateral programmes in the fields of international security and terrorism, innovation and knowledge society, and beyond, is a way of strengthening global regulation and global institutions. As stated by Miguel Santos Neves (2007), there has been in recent years a “clear and more consistent convergence between China and the EU at the multilateral level on global security issues”. To build upon these and other areas where there is already some common background can be a good way of further deepening mutual trust and increasingly engage in joint initiatives. In this regard, Bernt Berger and Uwe Wissenbach (2007) suggest a two track approach, through the combination of a pragmatic policy mainstreaming on the one hand and a focus on complementarity on the other: “the cooperation could lead to confidence-building and have spill-over effects into other areas of possible cooperation. Policy mainstreaming in the first phase is only an option for those areas that are relatively uncontroversial in terms of values and objectives. For example, public sector support or infrastructurebuilding require coordinated policies in order to achieve efficient results, self-sustaining institutions...”¹²
- Working on common positions and approaches to global challenges, which affect all three partners and go beyond their self-interests. In many aspects, China intends to be the voice of the developing world on several issues and is

¹² Berger, B.; Wissenbach, U. (2007a): *EU-China-Africa Trilateral Development Cooperation: Common challenges and new directions*. Discussion Paper, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, Bonn, p.22.

therefore interested in coordinating positions with African partners; the EU is also engaged in implementing an EU-Africa Joint Strategy and Action Plan that calls for increased cooperation towards common issues, including climate change, global security, energy, or the new international aid architecture.

- Within this context, it is important to work not only in a trilateral partnership, but in a broader multilateral framework that further involves emerging donors (such as India, Brazil, South Africa and others) in global discussions and decisions. The reality of “new” donors is adding apparent contradictions and complexity to the international aid architecture. China, for instance, has signed the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness as a recipient but there are on-going talks with the DAC/OECD to involve China in donors’ discussions. One of the topics for dialogue is certainly the status that these emerging donors will, and should, have at the global governance level (Bretton Woods institutions, G-8+, United Nations, WTO, etc).

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