

D.2 China in Africa

Essays

The Discursive Edifice of the Chinese Belt & Road Initiative in Africa: State Council of China White Paper-- "China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals" [《新时代的中非合作》白皮书（全文）]

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Recently, Senegalese Foreign Minister Aïssata Tall Sall and Chinese ambassador Xiao Han 肖晗 announced that the China-Africa Conference will be held in Senegal 29-30 November.² The announcement was made at a briefing to the diplomatic corps in Senegal. At the same time the convenors announced the outline of the four key documents that are meant to be produced by the end of the meeting.³ In the wake of the announcement, it was reported that Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Weibin declared the FOCAC the “golden brand for South-South cooperation” and added that all 55 FOCAC members will

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² Eric Olander, “Chinese, Senegalese Governments Formally Announce FOCAC Dates and Themes,” The China-Africa Project (8 November 2021); available [<https://chinaafricaproject.com/2021/11/08/chinese-senegalese-governments-formally-announce-focac-dates-and-themes/>].

³ “FOCAC--8e Conférence ministérielle à Dakar: Quatre dossiers au menu,” Quotidien (5 November 2021); available [] (“Et ils adopteront, selon le ministre des Affaires étrangères et des Sénégalais de l’extérieur, quatre documents, à savoir la déclaration dite de Dakar de la 8ème conférence ministérielle du Focac, le Plan d’action de Dakar (2022-2024), la vision 2035 de la coopération Chine-Afrique et la déclaration sino-africaine sur la coopération sur le changement climatique.” [The Dakar Action Plan 2022-2024 (which appears to be the most prominent); The 2035 vision of China-Africa cooperation; The Sino-African declaration on cooperation on climate change; and The Dakar declaration (most likely a sort of final communiqué)]).

attend the conference in Dakar. Note that the reference to “55” is not a country count but instead the total number of “members” which includes 53 countries, plus the African Union Commission and, of course, China.”⁴

The China Africa Forum has provided a space for the better integration of Chinese-African state relationships within the framework, increasingly, of the Chinese Belt & Road Initiative.⁵ Nonetheless, already at the time of the announcement, one could begin to see in its titling the quite distinct perspectives of the ‘hub’ of the BRI from its ‘spokes’.⁶ In his address opening the Forum,⁷ Xi Jinping described the conception of the shape of China-Africa relations from the perspective of its Hub as one that appeared aligned to the core Chinese ideological line of “community of shared future in the new era” this way:

First, insist on uniting to fight the epidemic. We must uphold the people’s supremacy and life supremacy, promote the spirit of science, support vaccine intellectual property exemptions, and effectively guarantee the availability and affordability of vaccines in Africa, and bridge the “immunity gap.”

Second, deepen pragmatic cooperation. It is necessary to expand the scale of trade and investment, share experience in poverty reduction, strengthen cooperation in the digital economy, and promote the development of African youth entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises. African countries are welcome to actively support and participate in global development initiatives.

Third, promote green development. It is necessary to advocate the concept of green and low-carbon, actively develop renewable energy such as solar and wind energy, promote the

⁴ Eric Olander, “Chinese, Senegalese Governments Formally Announce FOCAC Dates and Themes,” *supra*.

⁵ See, e.g., Heng Wang, “China’s Approach to the Belt and Road Initiative: Scope, Character and Sustainability,” *Journal of International Economic Law* 22(1):29-55 (2019).

⁶ On the hub and spoke structure of BRI in the context of global consensus around business and human rights, see, Heather A. Conley, Jonathan E. Hillman, Donatienne Ruy, Maesea McCalpin, “China’s “Hub-and-Spoke” Strategy in the Balkans,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (April 2020); available [http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200427_ChinaStrategy.pdf] ; Larry Catá Backer, “Belt and Road Initiative and the Future of Global Trade?” Presentation at the 2020 Law and Society Virtual Conference 29 May 2020, *Law at the End of the Day* (30 May 2020); available [https://lbackerblog.blogspot.com/2020/05/belt-and-road-initiative-and-future-of.html].

⁷ 习近平出席中非合作论坛第八届部长级会议开幕式并发表主旨演讲 2021-11-29 23:32 [China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Xi Jinping attended the opening ceremony of the 8th Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and delivered a keynote speech 2021-11-29 23:32]; available [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/tpxw/202111/t20211129_10458620.shtml] (Hereafter Xi Jinping Address).

effective implementation of the Paris Agreement in response to climate change, and continuously enhance the capacity for sustainable development.

Fourth, maintain fairness and justice. The world needs true multilateralism. Peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy, and freedom are the common values of all mankind and the common goals of China and Africa. We all stand for a development path that suits our own national conditions, we are committed to safeguarding the rights and interests of developing countries, and we all oppose interference in internal affairs, racial discrimination, and unilateral sanctions. We must uphold the just propositions of developing countries with confidence and transform our common demands and common interests into common actions.⁸

These four propositions serve as a basis for building China-Africa cooperation in more specific forms. Note their progression--from the specific (fighting the epidemic), to the more general (trade cooperation for poverty reduction and progress toward sustainability in line with international norms), to the least specific (maintain fairness and justice). Yet each proposition also contained within it pragmatic strategies that might serve to advance Chinese interests at home. The fight against the pandemic touches on the intellectual property and patent regimes at the heart of globalization, one which advantages traditional OECD states. Its weakening would serve Chinese interests when directed toward those areas where its technologies lag. The others then work in reverse. Each of them serves as a basis for internationalizing the Chinese model for development (and with it its socialist economic system and its vanguardist political model). More pragmatically each centers Chinese strengths at the core of the relationship with less developed African states.

⁸ Xi Jinping Address, *supra*. In the original:

第一，坚持团结抗疫。要坚持人民至上、生命至上，弘扬科学精神，支持疫苗知识产权豁免，切实保障疫苗在非洲的可及性和可负担性，弥合“免疫鸿沟”。

第二，深化务实合作。要扩大贸易和投资规模，共享减贫脱贫经验，加强数字经济合作，促进非洲青年创业和中小企业发展。欢迎非洲国家积极支持参与全球发展倡议。

第三，推进绿色发展。要倡导绿色低碳理念，积极发展太阳能、风能等可再生能源，推动应对气候变化《巴黎协定》有效实施，不断增强可持续发展能力。

第四，维护公平正义。世界需要真正的多边主义。和平、发展、公平、正义、民主、自由是全人类的共同价值，是中非双方孜孜以求的共同目标。我们都主张走符合自身国情的发展道路，都致力于维护发展中国家权益，都反对干涉内政、种族歧视、单边制裁。我们要理直气壮坚持发展中国家的正义主张，把我们的共同诉求和共同利益转化为共同行动。

One appreciates this more in the nine specific areas of cooperation are then identified.⁹ These include sanitation and health projects, agricultural projects, agricultural export projects, loans and other support for indigenous industrialization projects, digital innovation projects, green development, education capacity building using Chinese resources, a humanities exchange project, and lastly, a peace and security project.¹⁰

The discursive framing of these none project categories tends to suggest fulfillment of the core principles around which they are constructed. At the same each, each is to a large extent dependent on Chinese leadership, and each centers the activity on Chinese leadership. Mutuality is preserved in the sense of mutual benefit, but the benefit is contextually equivalent though not necessarily comparable. The discursive structures of BRI based China-Africa cooperation, then, builds a conceptual and discursive structure that fit the project in a quite unique way. Sanitation and health projects will require tech transfer, personnel and enterprises from China to oversee or at least partner with local concerns (big brother little sister arrangements). Agricultural projects can either aid in national food security programs or serve to continue to contribute to Africa's role as farmland to the rest of the world. That later objective is implied by the third of the projects--agricultural exports involving Chinese distribution chains and contributing to the strength and coherence of Chinese distribution networks. Industrial lending deeply injects Chinese banks and financing entities into the most granular practices of borrowers extending oversight of local economic development and management at its extreme of local macroeconomic policies. Digital innovation places Chinese tech at the center of local tech development, a critically important element as the U.S and China fight for tech dominance. Green development projects place Chinese tech at the foreground of innovation and advances Chinese ambitions to drive that sector. Education capacity building serves as a venue for internationalizing the Chinese socialist path by changing the baselines principles that may be included in core educational programs. Peace and security projects makes it easier for China to project military power around the globe and especially in defense of its silk roads and its investments along them.

It is important to underscore that none of this is bad. It is the essence of statecraft that centers national interest in a way that also provides benefit to foreign partners. That is both the essence of the Belt & Road Initiative and China's general internationalist thrust. Mutually beneficial relations and projects that promise contextually positive benefit. These may not be equal but equivalent in contextually useful value. And all under the guidance of the central authorities.

The discursive manifestation of these ideological strategies were very much in evidence in the context of FOCAC. In the run up to the event, the Chinese State Council Information Office has released its position

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

white paper: China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals [original: 《新时代的中非合作》白皮书（全文）].¹¹ It provides a discursive and thematic foundation for the further elaboration of the framing of the China-Africa relationship through the lens of the Belt & Road Initiative.

The Chinese discursive position builds on now common themes: "The two sides will focus on boosting quality development and further align the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative with those of the AU's Agenda 2063, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the development strategies of individual African countries. They will build the Belt and Road into a road to peace, prosperity, openness, green development, innovation and cultural exchanges, and create a China-Africa community of shared future in the new era."¹²

Yet African leaders, still quite eager for deepening economic relations,¹³ are also increasingly sensitive to the terms of those arrangements, especially after the usually confidential arrangements have been revealed in part.¹⁴ The terms of the loans suggest the nature of the relationships between Chinese entities and African states, one that suggests the imbalances of mutuality.

These include confidentiality clauses that prevent borrowers from revealing the terms of the loans, informal collateral arrangements that benefit Chinese lenders over other creditors and promises to keep the debt out of collective restructurings - dubbed by the authors as "no Paris Club" clauses, the report said. The contracts also give substantial leeway for China to cancel loans or accelerate repayment, it added.¹⁵

That imbalance, in turn, suggests the price of desire, especially on the African side, and the willingness to exploit that desire to its benefit on the Chinese side. But that is hardly scandalous--it is rather an expression of the market. At the same time it exposes the disjunctions between the logics of the markets for sovereign relations, and the normative principles used to manage the limits of those markets.

Recent reporting of the precarious condition of the ownership and control of Uganda's Entebbe Airport suggest the complexities of the

¹¹ State Council of China, White Paper, China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals (Beijing: The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (November 2021); available [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/2021-11-26/ChinaAfrica.docx] (Hereafter the "State Council China and Africa White Paper")

¹² China and Africa in the New Era *supra*, Part IV(2)).

¹³ Jevans Nyabiage, "FOCAC: African nations push China for better trade deals in lead-up to Senegal Summit," *South China Morning Post* (5 November 2021)

¹⁴ "Database reveals secrets of China's loans to developing nations, says study," *Reuters* (31 March 2021); available [https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-china-emerging-debt/database-reveals-secrets-of-chinas-loans-to-developing-nations-says-study-idUSKBN2BN14H].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

relationship, in this case with Exim Bank of China.¹⁶ The circumstances nicely evidence the disjunction between the discursive stances of BRI and the exploitations of markets of desire in the logics of BRI's hub and spoke structure. Uganda got what it wanted, a critically necessary infusion of funds for its infrastructure ambitions, and China got what it wanted, a measure of control through financing and the protection of its principal against default. It was only after the agreement was finalized and the funds dispersed that the Uganda Civil Aviation Authority (UCAA) managers feeling uncomfortable with some clauses of the loan agreement raised red flags.¹⁷ Efforts to renegotiate were rejected and local authorities admitted that the loan was poorly negotiated though denied that the negotiation was tainted by corruption. Yet because this is a sovereign to sovereign relationship, it is understood that where necessary the government would intervene.¹⁸ Here, again, the mutuality and cooperation elements play out in ways that are to some extent shaped both by desire and markets.

But mutually advantageous relationships in these cooperative relationships also suggest its politics. There appears to be a push as well for reform in the structures through which these *cooperation* arrangements are structured and operationalized, that is for structural reform that protects Africans from themselves by limiting the space within which the markets driven cooperation may take place.¹⁹ Civil society organizations in Africa have begun to more effectively target this misalignment of (African) desire and (Chinese) capacity.²⁰ Yet much of it reflects the sort of lack of capacity and elite self-perpetuation²¹ that had, in prior years, also affected the ability of African institutions to effectively

¹⁶ Nelson Naturinda, "How Uganda coughed up Entebbe airport to China," *The East African* (25 November 2021); available [https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/business/how-uganda-coughed-up-entebbe-airport-to-china-3631398].

¹⁷ Ibid. ("Some 13 clauses were deemed unfriendly and as good as mortgaging the airport and eroding the country's sovereignty. The most troubling for the aviation bosses was a clause that gave Exim Bank the sole authority to approve withdrawals of funds from the UCAA accounts.")

¹⁸ Ibid. ("Finance minister Kasaija said in case of a loan default, the government would intervene. "In the unlikely event that UCAA were to fail to generate sufficient revenue to service the loan, the central government will step in," he said.")

¹⁹ Paul Nantulya, "The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation at 21: Where to Next?," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies* (3 September 2021); available [https://africacenter.org/spotlight/focac-forum-china-africa-cooperation-21-where-to-next/].

²⁰ See, Paul Nantulya, "Reshaping African Agency in China-Africa Relations," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies* (2 March 2021); available [https://africacenter.org/spotlight/reshaping-african-agency-china-africa-relations/] (providing illustrations but also suggesting the nature of the cooperative relationships on the ground)

²¹ Paul Nantulya, "The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation at 21," *supra* ("The Chinese partnership model prioritizes mutual dependency, reciprocal gestures, and networks (guānxi, 关系), meaning China must satisfy its partners—however weak—to accomplish its goals. Many African elites exploit this for self-serving ends.").

manage their relationships with liberal democratic states and the multinational enterprises whose centers are domiciled in OECD states.²²

It is with these realities in mind, now with Chinese characteristics, that it is worth considering the discursive efforts to suggest equality in the official public documents. Chinese efforts, though, focus elsewhere. That was made clear in Xi Jinping's address.²³ It was amplified by other Chinese officials. In a Seychelles News Agency interview on 17 November, China's ambassador to the Seychelles, Guo Wei, suggested the larger ambitions of cooperation beyond its temporal and granular critique, situating the principle of cooperation back to its geo-political discursive base.

FOCAC is our own platform for collective dialogue and mechanism for practical cooperation. It has bolstered high-level interactions and political trust between China and Africa, delivering a leap in China-Africa relations from "a new type of partnership" to "a new type of strategic partnership" and to "a comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership".²⁴

The Ambassador underscored an implication of cooperation outlined in Xi Jinping's nine point program for cooperation--the increasing role of private engagement in China BRI activities.²⁵ Here the discourse of cooperation also provides a space where Africa might serve both as a place into which Chinese enterprises might more easily project activities, but also one from which those enterprises, now Africanized, might also find their way indirectly into the core states of the OECD. That is important in the context of the decoupling of the Chinese and U.S. economies that started with the terms of Xi Jinping and Donald Trump.²⁶

²² Cf., Michael Hood, "Africa, the IMF, and the World Bank," *African Affairs* 86(344):331-342 (1987).

²³ Xi Jinping Address, *supra*.

²⁴ "Chinese Ambassador to Seychelles H.E. MME GUO Wei talks about the eighth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)," Seychelles New Agency (17 November 2021); available [http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/15835/Chinese+Ambassador+to+Seychelles+H.E.+MME+GUO+Wei+talks+about+the+eighth+Ministerial+Conference+of+the+Forum+on+China-Africa+Cooperation+FOCAC].

²⁵ *Ibid.* ("Private enterprises will play a greater role in the future. At present, private enterprises account for 90 percent of the number of Chinese companies in Africa and about 70 percent of total Chinese enterprises' direct investment in Africa. Companies such as Huawei and Transsion are well-known in Africa. The next conference will open up a broader space for the development of private enterprises in Africa.").

²⁶ See, e.g., Cissy Zhou, "US-China decoupling: if it comes down to a US bloc vs China bloc, who stands to gain the most?," *South China Morning Post* (16 September 2021); available [https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3149027/us-china-decoupling-if-it-comes-down-us-bloc-vs-china-bloc] ("If the decoupling between the world's two largest economies were to continue gradually – with supply chains rearranged rather than completely severed – the consequences would be much more disruptive to the China bloc than to the United States bloc, according to a new report by Capital Economics.").

The issue is not whether any of this is good or bad--African states have been undertaking quite risky financial relationships with outsiders since the current era of post-colonial independence. The more interesting question is the way that the variation in these risky relationships now focused on new Chinese partners may or may not align with the discourse of socialist internationalism and its ideals as expressed in the discourse of Belt & Road and the structuring of the ideologies versus the realities of socialist internationalism. Badly done, of course, these discursive disjunctions will eventually reduce the long term effectiveness of projections of Chinese power in Africa as it had those who had stood in a similar place a generation or so before.

But for the moment, this document provides a solid glimpse, at least discursively, as the way in which China now projects the Communist International with itself at the center. No more dreary policy driven by Soviet-Russified ideological catechisms.²⁷ In contrast to this offering up of a darker Dostoevsky built into the Comintern and its successors,²⁸ China builds an ideological foundation on the notion of a full belly and a prosperous state (prosperous at least for the interlinked networks of elite groups who dominate politics and economics). That enterprise, in turn, is to be guided by a national-Chinese partnership that aligns African national and regional aspirations to the engine of the Chinese core. Instead what is offered is arability and prosperity--with China at the center.

Africa becomes the prism through which China can manifest a comprehensive application of its new internationalism generally, and its manifestation as a form of Chinese global leadership in particular. The State Council China and Africa White Paper starts by placing China at the nexus point of two global orders. It is at once "the largest developing country in the world"²⁹ with shared past experiences and the engine that now helps African states achieve a version of Chia's development.³⁰

The State Council China and Africa White Paper, then, emphasizes two tracks. The first is trust based on common origins and

²⁷ Vladimir Lenin, "Speech At a Joint Session of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee, the Moscow Soviet, Factory Committees and Trade Unions of Moscow" (29 July 1918); available [https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jul/29.htm] ("but we have never harbored the illusion that the forces of the proletariat and the revolutionary people of one country, however heroic and however organized and disciplined they might be, could overthrow international imperialism. That can be done only by the joint effort of the workers of the world").

²⁸ Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern: A History of the Third International* (Bookmarks, 1985); John W. Garver, "Comment: Mao, the Comintern and the Second United Front," *The China Quarterly* 129:171-179 (1992).

²⁹ State Council China in Africa White Paper, Foreword.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11; also *ibid.* p 41 ("China has eliminated the historical problem of absolute poverty, and achieved moderate prosperity in all respects. It has embarked on a new journey toward building China into a modern socialist country by the time the PRC celebrates its centenary in 2049").

shared revolutionary and post-colonial histories.³¹ The second is mutual aid.³² Mutual aid is not merely markets based aid in things--but also in culture, political organization, and sustainability. And thus from a grounding in mutual trust, and under the guidance of the more successful of the revolutionary friends of the mid 20th century,³³ arise the four great themes that then form the core of Xi Jinping's address at the start of FOCAC 2021.³⁴

The two strands of the relationship--trust born of mutual historical struggle³⁵ and mutual advantage born of development compatibility--then come together under the structures of the Belt & Road Initiative. The Belt & Road Initiative, though, provides more than a rationalizing framework. Discursively it serves as the structures through which China's successful development model can be exported and modified to fit local conditions. To develop, then, China's successful path is a model. To emulate that model requires the development of capacity that comes from a willingness to be guided toward success in the adaptation of the Chinese path. To implement that adaptation then produces a displacement of the older models, the liberal democratic models, and a tighter connection institutionalized through the BRI.

When China-Africa cooperation thrives, South-South cooperation will flourish. When China and Africa are fully developed, the world will be a better place. Cooperation in the new era is the sure way for China and Africa to realize common development. It will lay more solid foundations for building an even stronger China-Africa community of shared future, and build up strong momentum for the rise of developing countries as a whole, and for more balanced international relations.³⁶

Thus the discursive structures of China's model offered to the (developing) world as a counter to that once proffered by liberal democratic states and based on purely economic markers backed up by the normative principles of liberal democracy. This approach, already long in the making, was refined in the development of a powerful

³¹ Ibid., p. 3 ("China-Africa friendship has not been an overnight achievement, nor has it been gifted from on high. Rather, it has been fostered throughout the years when China and Africa supported and stood alongside each other in trying times").

³² Ibid., p. 25 ("China and Africa have joined forces in confronting the grave challenge posed by Covid-19, further reinforcing their friendship. The solidarity between the Chinese and African peoples enables them to overcome difficulties and obstacles and build a bright future.")

³³ Ibid. ("China and Africa trust each other and China-Africa friendship is rock-solid. China is committed to consolidating China-Africa political mutual trust, expanding pragmatic cooperation with Africa in various areas, and extending its help to boost peace and development in the continent.").

³⁴ See Xi Jinping's Address, *supra*. Text at n. 8.

³⁵ State Council China in Africa White Paper, *supra*, p. 8 ("Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, China and African countries have always been good friends who stand together through prosperity and adversity, . . . and good comrades who fully trust each other in a shifting international landscape.").

³⁶ Ibid., p.7.

discursive counter-thrust to the Hong Kong protests.³⁷ Stability and prosperity are then built on a Maoist-Leninist foundation of binaries: core-collective; patriot-traitor; vanguard-masses; order-chaos; planning-markets; interference-cooperation; mutual benefit-neocolonial exploitation and so on. It is a powerful set of discursive tropes, ones which remain unmatched by a liberal democratic camp that has become mired in its own ideological civil wars and can offer up little more than the sort of dreary catechisms once reserved for the Soviets. Yet in the process China is seeking to build, discursively certainly, a more pragmatic but still ideologically potent new international. “In the new era, through solidarity and cooperation, the peoples of China and Africa will set an example in increasing the wellbeing of humanity, creating a new type of international relations, and building a global community of shared future.”³⁸ The irony of this inversion from the 1960s ought not to be lost on anyone.

The long form discursive trajectories of the State Council China in Africa White Paper, then, provide an elaboration of what in condensed form has become the signature approach to outbound projection of Chinese power. China serves as the hub for its friends. It is also the vanguard of leading forces that seek to displace the old era forms of globalization (with the United States as its core) with its own for the new era.



³⁷ The genesis of which is discussed in Larry Catá Backer, *Hong Kong Between ‘One Country’ and ‘Two Systems’* (Little Sir Press, 2021).

³⁸ State Council China in Africa White Paper, *supra*, p.7.