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# Towards a Post-Western Global Governance? How Africa-China relations in(form) China's Practices

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## **Abstract**

We often hear and read about the various ways in which China can help African countries develop, about how Africans should learn this lesson or the other from China, and about how China's interests in Africa in the early 2000s have made Africa become more visible as an international market and a trade partner. We do not, however, hear or read enough about the ways in which Africa reciprocally provides opportunities for China (other than natural resource supplies), about how trading (multilaterally and bilaterally) with African countries helps China gain much-needed experience in global economic development, or about how cooperation platforms between China and African states have provided much needed feedback for China to adjust and readjust its conduct according to different contexts. Trading with African countries opens up many unique opportunities for China that remain underexplored in the extant literature. This article seeks to rectify this mainly by focusing on what China learns about global governance from its experience implementing trade and investment projects across Africa.

## **Keywords**

China, G20, Global Governance, Africa, Foreign Policy, emerging powers

## **Introduction**

On September 4th and 5th of 2016, China's ancient capital Hangzhou hosted the eleventh edition of the G20 summit. Hangzhou has traditionally been a commercial and trade hub of China during the Song Dynasty and it is only fitting that this year's G20 summit is hosted there further emphasizing China's re-emergence as a contemporary trade hub. The summit's theme reads "towards an innovative, invigorated, interconnected, and inclusive world economy," and among the ten target-outcomes China aims to achieve through the summit is "adopt[ing] an action plan for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Devel-

opment,” “deepen[ing] reform of the international financial architecture,” and “initiating cooperation to support industrialization of Africa.”<sup>1</sup> I highlight these three particular outcomes because they symbolize China’s perception of global governance in a succinct way. The first goal which is about achieving the United Nations development goals signals China’s intention to pursue a continuation of existing international development goals and support of existing international order and institutions (the UN in this case). The second goal which is about deeply reforming the financial architecture suggests China’s dissatisfaction with current financial institutions (IMF mainly) and intention in launching and promoting Chinese alternative financial institutions (namely the BRICS bank which is also known New Development Bank NDB and the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank AIIB, among others). These first goals, in my sense, sum up China’s dual strategy vis-à-vis the current international order, support the continuation of the order by backing UN-led development initiatives while at the same time initiating alternative institutions and platforms (see Bloomfield 2015, Clark 2014, Feng 2015, Sohn 2012). The third goal signals the importance and central role of Africa to China’s global governance agenda and is the main focus of this article.

To be sure, besides the visibility that organizing and hosting as high-level event as the G20 gives to China, the summit is also an opportunity for Chinese policy makers to promote and further discuss of the role of two large scale China-led initiatives, AIIB and the New Silk Road in international development as well as China’s learned expertise – from interacting with African states – with regards to international development. The question asked in this article is, what should we expect Global Governance with Chinese characteristics to look like? The argument presented is that by examining China’s Africa policy and its development agenda in Africa, we can extrapolate and understand China’s overall perceptions of global governance and how to go about it.

In this pursuit, this article is organized as follows. First, I provide a brief analysis of China-Africa relations – mostly from the China-Africa cooperation summit (FOCAC) given its relevance to the topic of global governance. I propose that gaining experience with FOCAC Forum has had implications on how China views its role in economic global governance through platforms such as the G20. Next, I highlight the ways in which cooperation with African states shapes China’s experience with multilateral cooperation and global governance. Africa, indeed, represents an opportunity for Chinese foreign policy to both show to the international community that Beijing is committed to peace and security and to advance Chinese alternatives to the Washington Consensus. Africa is also the place where Chinese foreign policy can have bilateral as well as multilateral cooperation mechanisms which enhances China’s cooperation skills. Third, I explore

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.chinagate.cn/2016-08/23/content\\_39145247.htm](http://en.chinagate.cn/2016-08/23/content_39145247.htm) accessed September 2, 2016.

the question of what global governance with Chinese characteristics might look like if we extrapolate from the context of China's Africa policy to China's global strategy. It follows that, as I explain in subsequent parts of the article, China's Africa strategy has many similarities with how the Belt and Road Initiative is set to be implemented. Based on analyzing these similarities, I highlight some salient characteristics of China's model of investment-led development such as the infrastructure for natural resources swap, the focus on investments in lieu of fungible foreign aid, and the centrality of promoting people-to-people exchanges. The article then ends with a discussion of the opportunities and challenges facing China as it takes on a more assertive leadership role in global governance.

### **Background to China-Africa trade and investment relations**

Today, China is Africa's largest partner, but it is not a new partner. Scholars have traced the first encounter between China and the African continent to the naval expeditions of general Zheng He in 1418 (Xing and Farah 2013: 134). Fast forward to a more recent era, China-Africa's contemporary relations can be traced to the Bandung Conference which took place in the midst of waves of anti-colonial wars across Global South states (Alden and Large 2011: 28). The Bandung Conference and the non-aligned movement both diffused a spirit of solidarity among Global South states as they were struggling against Western hegemonism. In the period between the 1960s and 1980s, China and African states have been mutually supportive of one another. China, under Mao, provided assistance during and after the independence wars, while African states stood with China during its bid for the United Nations Security Council (Taylor 2011: 56).

Since then, China Africa relations have changed substantially. The recent relations have become more expansive, less ideologically-motivated, more robust and also more institutionalized due to FOCAC. FOCAC which is the Forum of China Africa Cooperation was initiated in the year 2000 and convenes every three years alternating between being held in Beijing and an African capital. The Forum includes all but four African countries (which recognize Taiwan as independent of China) and since 2012 the African Union was added as a full member (Benabdallah 2015: 52). FOCAC can either be held as a conference (Ministerial-level) or as a summit (Heads of states-level) and results in Action Plans which are implemented and evaluated over a period of three years. In the next section I examine FOCAC as a governance platform with the purpose of analyzing how Africa-China relations shape China's governance practices.

### **FOCAC as a China-Africa governance Platform**

Global governance is a capacious term which refers to formal and informal, private and public institutions (such as the UN, WB, Green Peace, etc.) which aim

at addressing issues which concern international actors and necessitate collective action to resolve (Acharya 2016, Stephen 2014: 4). Summits such as the G8 and G 20 are examples of governance platforms. In the context of China-Africa relations, the Forum for China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is an example of a global governance platform for Chinese policy makers and African counterparts to discuss development goals, visions, challenges, and agenda plans for the years to come.

To date, there have been six editions of FOCAC. Each FOCAC crafts China-Africa cooperation action plan for the coming three years. The agenda of each forum usually announces the disbursement of an amount of financial assistance which usually gets divided according to a project-based approach. For example, the latest FOCAC (held in South Africa late 2015) promised \$60 billion worth of loans, aid, funding, and other projects. This amount was double the amount announced during the fifth FOCAC meeting and by August 2016, the Chinese government announced that about 95% of FOCAC 6th total amount has been disbursed. The areas of cooperation covered under FOCAC include everything from economic, cultural, social, military, agricultural, financial and educational programs. FOCAC action plans also include a mix of foreign direct investment projects, foreign aid, concessional loans, etc. Some of the recurrent themes across the different Forum agendas include environment protection, sustainable energy extraction, wildlife conservation, terrorism, piracy, food security, health epidemics, etc. The agenda plans usually consist of Chinese policy makers offering assistance to resolve these issues using Chinese and African expertise on the matter.

### ***What FOCAC tells us about China's economic governance model***

Besides financial gains from the multilateral cooperation platform, China-Africa summits open up other opportunities for China's role in Global Governance. Here I focus on three main points. First, African leaders' constant loop of feedback about their cooperation with China on what works and what needs to be changed helps Chinese policy makers tweak, adapt, or change certain aspects of its investment strategy. For example, the focus on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which is a commitment by companies to integrate environmental and social justice considerations in their business negotiations and plans, is something that Chinese firms are learning to implement based on their experiences in Africa (Bednarz 2013). CSR is a relatively new concept for Chinese companies and even as these companies operate domestically (in China), they do not always implement CSR (see Negusu Aklilu 2014, 34). However, because of grass root-level activism and civil society organizations in many African countries calling on foreign investors to pay attention to indigenous populations' rights, environmental justice and wildlife, Chinese state-owned as well as private firms are learning to include CSR into their operations and projects Tan-Mullins and Mohan 2012.

Second, engaging with African states on such diverse platforms as infrastructure, cultural exchange, fighting E-bola epidemic, anti-piracy, among many other areas give Chinese peacekeepers, soldiers, development practitioners, and policy makers more international practice, builds trust, and promote China as a responsible great power. Thirdly, FOCAC-sponsored projects give an opportunity for Chinese-led development alternatives to be tested on African contexts and hence tuned/adjusted as necessary. This is perhaps the most relevant opportunity to China's role in global governance.

At this point, one might ask what exactly are Chinese-led alternatives to international development? There are many things about international development that China does differently from the OECD or the Washington Consensus but I will briefly highlight a few of the most important defining characteristics of China's international development model or what some have coined the Beijing Consensus:

- Investment-led rather than foreign-aid based development,
- Resource for infrastructure swaps instead of fungible aid,
- Investments (by China) in improving people-to-people bonds, and, relatedly,
- A vital focus on technology transfers, investments in human resource development, and capacity building projects in order to ensure the sustainability of development projects.

### **Extrapolating from FOCAC to G20**

Even though China's global governance engagement is far more expansive beyond Africa and its summit experiences are not limited to its relations with African states, exploring the China-Africa summit suggests certain characteristics that we may expect to see as standards in China's global governance strategy. The G20 platform is an excellent opportunity for China to show its integration in the current international order, cooperate with the world's most dynamic economies on multilateral development projects. Of course if for the previous G20 summits China was a participant mostly, in this G20, China is expected to show leadership and initiative in showcasing the Chinese experience with development both domestically and through its relations with African countries. During this summit and acting as the host, Chinese delegates seize the historic moment of hosting this summit for the first time to not only discuss how the group can work with banks and other actors to advance Global Governance but also to promote China's own brand of development and share its development programs for Global South states.

China is prepared to show leadership capabilities through the establishment and launching of two major initiatives which mark Xi Jinping's presidency: The Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) and the One Belt One Road (BRI) Initiative. The BRI initiative is a development/infrastructure plan while AIIB is a financial institution that supports BRI-related projects and other independent development projects. In this section I briefly discuss how they both work to advance global governance and development with Chinese characteristics. However, before I move on to that part, I would like to highlight here that having launched BRI as well as AIIB successfully before the G20 summit suggests that China is ready to show that it can be a major player in global governance and that it can have much experience to share with other great powers on financial and developmental sustainability. China's readiness with these platforms suggests a new phase of China's foreign policy making which lends itself more to norm-making rather than norm-following. Whereas China is still operating within the international order that exists, through participating at G20 meetings, UN peacekeeping missions, and other financial institutions, it is also sending signals that it deserves a seat as a major power that is qualified to advance its own initiatives.

Indeed, as I proposed in the introductory section, China's focus on both upholding the UNSDG and deeply reforming the international financial architecture suggest that Chinese foreign policy seeks to promote two things at once: change and continuity in the current international order. The G20 summit is a fitting exemplar of this dual track strategy. On the one hand China is providing support to the existing international institutions and proactively participating by hosting the summit. Yet on the other hand, China is advancing BRI and AIIB at the G20 summit as successful infrastructure and financial initiatives which have important lessons to share. China's call and interest in setting the agenda and writing the rules of the game is evident in selecting the official mantra for the summit to be about prioritizing "robust trade and investment." The three sub-themes which complement this mantra are "breaking a new path for growth," "more effective and efficient global economic and financial governance," and "inclusive and interconnected development." These four themes together are in line with China's foreign policy making in Africa.

### **Beyond the G20: towards a Post-Western Global Governance?**

Global governance often gets critiqued for being Western-centric and for failing to respond to the particular needs and issues that emerge with the resurgence of regional and middle-income powers (Krickovic 2015: 557-558). Indeed, global governance under the U.S. and European powers' leadership has experienced, especially due the financial crisis of 2008, setbacks and fatigue see (Overbreek 2010: 701). Some of the specific shortcomings and failures include: a democratic deficit, lack of effective solutions to pressing issues such as climate change (Stevensen

2016), energy governance, financial stability, and unsatisfactory representation of developing countries (Dingwerth and Pattberg 2010: 702). However with platforms such as the G20 which does invite to the table many developing countries, and with China's leadership role in this latest G20 a question that begs to be asked is, what does a post-Western global governance look like? It is evident, in my sense, that if China takes on a more proactive leadership role in participating in Global Governance with platforms as inclusive and big as OBOR and AIIB, we could expect to see a different set of opportunities and challenges open up. I discuss these in the following sections.

First in terms of opportunities, an assertive role by China in global governance entails promoting the Beijing Consensus (the Chinese brand of development) as a viable alternative to the (Post) Washington Consensus. This might eventually lead to democratizing global governance by adding various alternative ways of getting at the same end goals (the UN 2030 sustainable development goals). Similarly, democratizing global governance has also the advantage of reducing the risks of monopoly of global governance rule-making by a few (primarily) neo-liberal, western-led institutions. Indeed, promoting a Chinese-led understanding of global governance can change the long Western-dominated global economic governance and provide a perspective from the Global South which is often the target of global governance policies.

China is uniquely well-positioned to take advantage of these opportunities and maximize on its position primarily because it has the financial prowess to resolve hanging global issues. Its willingness to play a more visible role on the international stage is now more than ever vital to the resolution of global trans-border issues (Abdenur 2014, Feng 2016). Additionally, China has the late-comer advantage in terms of assessing what has worked and what hasn't and further has the advantage of implementing sustainable development goals from the start of its projects rather than retrospectively work to render sustainable projects that have already been established. Relatedly, China is also strategically positioned and well-connected to both Global South states and big powers (Breslin and Liu 2016). China is part of BRICS, has strong relations and bonds of trust with several Global South leaders, while at the same time holds veto power at the UNSC and chairs exclusive club summits such as the G20. Last but not least, Chinese foreign policy's focus on people-to-people exchanges via capacity building programs and investments in human resource development projects open up unique opportunities for knowledge production and technology transfers of Chinese know-hows to different parts of the Global South.

### **Conclusion: Challenges Facing Chinese-Led Global Governance**

Despite the many promising opportunities that could result from a China-led

Post-Western Global Governance model, there remain a few salient challenges which need to be addressed in concert with as many relevant parties (beyond the G20) as possible. I here explore three main challenges facing China's potential leadership role in global governance.

First, one of the most urgent challenges stems not from economic issues but instead from security concerns such as the rise of extremist violent organizations' threats and China's insufficient expertise in handling this (Chin and Thakur 2010). Indeed, whereas China's experience in international development and economic growth has matured significantly in the past two decades, its experience addressing global security challenges such as counterterrorism and CVE is very limited. A second challenge that faces China is the uncertainty of currency exchange value and decreasing oil prices. Platforms like the New Silk Road rely primarily on deals which consist of China providing infrastructure projects paid for by natural resources. The recent waves of depreciating value of natural gas and oil suggest that Chinese-built projects may in fact end up costing a lot more than the agreed-upon quantity of natural resources. Lastly, China's general reticent approach about civil society, NGOs, and advocacy groups can be problematic (Benabdallah 2015.) IR scholars increasingly argue for the need to pool the "wisdom of the great" when trying to anticipate potential issues or craft responses to emerging problems. Civil society is an important member of the stakeholders in global governance decision-making, policy crafting, as well implementation. Chinese foreign policy has yet to find ways to incorporate civil society organizations.

Overall, China's vital role in the success of global governance platforms in achieving UNSDG and promoting international development initiatives is without doubt. China's unique positionality as a "great power" as well as a "developing country" allows it room for maneuvering and negotiating on both sides of the table. Yet at the same time, this article showed how China learns quite a significant amount from interacting with African states, receiving input from them about Chinese-implemented projects, and gaining international-level experience while sending Chinese experts across the African continent.

### **Bio**

Lina Benabdallah is completing a doctoral degree in International Relations at the department of Political Science of the University of Florida. Her scholarly interests include foreign policy conducts of rising powers and post-Western IR. Her dissertation examines Beijing's investments in human resource development and capacity building programs in Africa. It seeks to understand in what ways, besides economic leverage, China builds and diffuses power in its relations with Global South states.



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