

The Limitations of EU-China Cooperation in Africa

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Hearing on the China-Europe Relationship and Transatlantic Implications

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It has been five years now since the EU and China vowed to pursue a partnership on African affairs. While it is evident that both sides have common interest in the region and progress has been made in setting up different kinds of dialogues, they are not getting anywhere close to a mature partnership. Especially in regard to security issues and development cooperation there is hardly anything to report in terms of synergies. Important impediments are China's reluctance to buy into the sort of standards that the EU deems important for Africa's development and the fact that the EU is not considered a reliable partner. It would be counterproductive, though, to put all the blame on China. If the West is to promote stability and development in Africa, it needs to recognize that China's Africa policies mature in an environment that is characterized by distrust and competition among many players, which is skillfully exploited by local regimes. Trilateral cooperation is therefore never going to work without a multilateral framework.

1. The state of EU-China cooperation on Africa

It was the European Parliament that set the wheels in motion when it started to organize hearings on China and Africa in 2006. A subsequent report urged the Europe Commission to explore coordination with Beijing and to advance Europe's standards in regard to development cooperation, human rights, and good governance. What triggered this interest were mostly the atrocities in Darfur, the megalomaniac summit of the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2006, and the fact that European news media extensively covered China's new quest for raw materials. Most of these concerns were instantly echoed by member states. The French and Italians cautioned that Europe's economic interests were in peril. Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that Europe and Africa had to stick together. The UK, the Netherlands, and most Scandinavian members feared that China was undermining Europe's efforts to promote liberal standards in African

business and politics.

To the surprise of the Chinese counterparts, the European Commission pushed for clause in Africa in the joint statement of the 2006 China-EU summit in Helsinki. The Commission also launched its new communication on China, in which the latter's behavior in Africa was questioned. In 2007, Commissioner for Development Louis Michel invited a large delegation of Chinese officials to discuss a trilateral dialogue, which Beijing accepted. In 2008, the development directorate of the Commission issued a communication that identified security, infrastructure, natural resources, and agriculture as areas for cooperation. During the drafting process, however, other directorates of the European Commission heavily criticized this policy paper for being a solo initiative that lacked a broader strategic context. China also made clear that it did not wish to be singled out by such paper, "while other powers could behave as they please in Africa".

Topic	Target	Dialogue	Adjustment	Cooperation
Transparency extractive industries	Coaxing China into EITI	yes	no	no
Transparency development aid	Coaxing China into OECD-DAC	yes	no	no
Accountability in foreign loans	Promoting Paris Club Rules	yes	no	no
Curb trade in blood diamonds	Promote Kimberly process	yes	yes	no
Curb illicit timber trade	Via Flegt	yes	yes	partial
Infrastructure development	Bilateral cooperation/EU-AfricaPI	yes	no	no
Agricultural development	Bilateral cooperation Cooperation/Joint corridor	yes	no	no
Cooperation on anti-piracy	CMF/Atalanta/Shade	yes	no	no
Cooperation on UN peacekeeping	Bilateral cooperation	yes	no	no
Curbing illegal arms trade	Bilateral cooperation	yes	yes	partial
Combating terrorism	Bilateral cooperation	yes	no	no
European Peace Facility Fund	Chinese financial contribution	yes	no	no

Table 1. An evaluation of European policy objectives in regard to cooperation with China in Africa.

How much of the objectives in the 2008 communication have been achieved? The European Commission and the Chinese MFA have set up an annual dialogue. During that dialogue, both sides exchange views on the situation in specific countries. Since 2010, broader issues – such as piracy, the African Peace and Security Architecture, and unconstitutional changes of government – and are discussed as well. Those meetings take place in a fairly amicable climate, but they have not generated a lot of tangible synergies. In 2008, the Commission and the MFA agreed to task their delegation and embassies to identify specific development projects on which they could cooperate, but that did not take off. Officials from both sides reckon that the two parties are still at the stage of "sharing experiences". We do not

find evidence that this sharing is also leading to convergence. China has been adjusting different parts of its cooperation for Africa, often for the better, but it does not give Europe any credit for it. When it comes to development cooperation, studies of Europe's aid practices drafted by Chinese think tanks often conclude that China cannot afford to follow Europe's example. The same goes for interaction with individual member states. At least seven member states maintain their own Africa-oriented dialogues with China, but none of them got anything operational out of it.

Private European companies, in the meantime, increasingly sought to jump on the China bandwagon. It is true that Chinese companies challenged European many firms in construction, transportation, and mining but, by and large, the latter now seek to turn it into an opportunity and to service China's quest for the African market. European oil companies have established joint ventures or sold concessions to Chinese companies. European mining companies in central Africa sell the majority of their ores to Chinese customers. Areva, the French national champion in nuclear energy, has established cooperation with China National Nuclear Corporation in exploiting uranium mines in Niger. Contractors that lost the battle in the construction business, now try to sell knowhow to Chinese construction firms. Transportation companies seek to position themselves as intermediaries between Africa and Eastern Asia. KLM and Air France, as an anecdotic note, now even operate a cargo service between Guangdong and Kenya with "hunting for business" in Chinese characters on their planes' tale. The European business community appears thus to be adjusting to new realities in Africa. Moreover, it has showed itself rather reticent in regard to the Commission's raw materials strategy or calls of some lobbyists to counterbalance China's success in infrastructure by setting up a European equivalent of China's loans-for-resources scheme.

Security has attracted particular attention. During the EU-China dialogues, both sides have stated their concern about the tensions between the two Sudans, Somalia and Nigeria. In case of Somalia, China has praised the EU police mission onshore and called for even more robust engagement. Europe has encouraged China to participate in the combat against piracy. There have been several exchanges between Chinese and European navy ships, but China declined to join forces in patrolling one single corridor. Chinese officials stated their concern that operation Atalanta was under strain because member states frequently fell short in committing sufficient ships. Chinese officials also showed themselves unimpressed about the ability of the European Military Staff to handle exchanges. This was also the case with the Libya evacuation during which China turned to France and NATO for briefings and Greece for logistic support, but left the whole EU architecture aside. The Libya intervention has largely been interpreted by China as yet another indication that the

EU is unable to play a leading role in its backyard – including Africa – and that the US is much more to watch when it comes to the security and stability of the African continent.

2. Explanations

The lack of progress in EU-China cooperation does not mean that there are no congruencies in terms of interests. As a distant trading partner China needs stability in Africa as much as Europe. Both sides have recognized the importance of sustainable development in Africa, the necessity to get the region out of the commodity trap, and the need of converting investment into opportunities for the broad African society. They also emphasized the central role of African regional organizations in promoting peace and security as well as the importance of regional infrastructure. Even in the field of energy and raw materials, Europe has an interest in China's willingness to spend giant sums to boost output in light of growing international demand.

The lack of cooperation could rather be attributed to the different ways in which Europe and China are using influence to fulfill their objectives. Obvious differences remain over political values, although there also remains a wide gap between the liberal standards of the European Union and the inclination of some member states to maintain close relations with political elites in key partner countries – however crooked they are. China also remains more inclined to pursue economic cooperation, instead of offering aid. But here as well, questions are asked about how much it pays off to provide in budget support and social infrastructure – two growing components of Europe's aid – when basic infrastructure is absent. As much as Chinese officials and experts start to question the overtly state-centric nature of cooperation with Africa and its infrastructure bias, European think tanks and policy makers more and more assert that Europe's cooperation with Africa has shifted too much into the opposite direction to be effective.

This clash between pragmatism/realism and idealism has been partly the product of diverging beliefs about the extent to which political and governmental variables can be influenced. While the debate about this notion is gaining traction, most Chinese genuinely assume that as long as China creates opportunities for Africa to grow, it automatically contributes to political stability. It is also widely accepted that some corruption is inevitable in Africa's economic take-off and that governance will only improve after social and economic conditions have ameliorated. Again, this is not just a normative expedient to deflect criticism. Officials are largely unimpressed by efforts of the EU to address corruption in developing countries and reckon that their way of providing “tangible” services to Africa – in return for commodities – is more

beneficial than, so to speak, conditions without engagement. With the latter, Chinese interlocutors usually refer to the modest volume in investments from Europe and the limited amounts available for financing infrastructure.

In addition, it is often held that the West is not serious about the values that it champions in Africa. In many conversations with European interlocutors, Chinese officials stress that the promotion of democracy tends to be a pretext for political interference, interference to the advantage of Western interests instead of African societies but. It is also broadly shared that Western and particularly European countries use liberal values to criticize China, and, in a protectionist mood, to counterbalance China in their backyard. Chinese officials and experts asserted that Western governments were taken in tow by NGOs, which, without any responsibility, pursued dubious interests. This lack of credibility and the distrust of Europe's intentions are key to understand China's reticence.

China has also become more confident in its Africa policies because it has not been confronted with major setbacks and because African leaders have frequently expressed their appreciation. While there have been instances of civil society disaffection, general views of China still tend to be quite favourable among the African public and elites. To be sure, China has frequently ended up in the epicentre of instability and violence, but it has not led decision makers to the conclusion that policies need to be altered or adjusted. At best there is a straddle between the strand of officials and experts who believe that non-interference becomes untenable and that China needs a more robust security policy. On the other hand, and this still seems the majority, it is maintained that China should adjust to contingencies, eventually evacuate workers whenever it is necessary, and that, in the end, China is an inevitable partner for any African leader that wants to stay in power. This debate is of course not static, but for now it still helps to explain why China sticks to its traditional posturing.

A last impediment is the incoherence of European and Chinese policymaking. Inevitably, Chinese officials lament that the European Commission is good in putting proposals and ideas on paper, but that it lacks the wherewithal to implement or to convince member states to join forces. The entry into force of the Lisbon Reform Treaty is not really changing this. The other way around, the Chinese Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Commerce (MOFCOM) are often not sufficiently informed to explain behaviour of state-owned companies, arms shipments, the activities of the PLA, or even projects initiated by local governments or CPC-bodies.

In sum, the disappointing state of EU-China cooperation on African affairs is the

consequence of a combination of a mutual legitimacy deficit, a lack of trust, and the complicated institutional nature of the EU and China's Africa policies. This renders it more difficult for both sides to advance their goals of stability and profitable yet durable economic cooperation. Crucial in this regard is also to recognize that the EU matters much less for China in Africa than the United States, emerging powers like India, and individual European member states like France. China will continue to adjust its policies more to the pragmatic behaviour of those players than to the declarations of European institutions. It also portends that it will continue to perceive Africa as a playground of new power politics in which it has to strike a balance between, on the one hand, a growing penchant for broadening cooperation beyond national elites and winning the hearts of the African people by giving in to some of their demands, and, on the other, the need to stay ahead of competitors in the race for resources and influence by fostering close relations with elites.

3. Implications for the US

The EU's efforts to "socialize China" with its norms have largely failed. That is not a reason though, to single the PRC out as a power that is intended to undermine European interests in Africa. It is surely challenging Western influence, but that is as much a consequence of the failure of European policies as of China's success. With the disappointing results of five years of engagement, there is growing concern that Europe could find itself entirely sidelined. This could encourage closer cooperation with the United States. In any case, there is not much reason to expect closer US-EU cooperation to make a huge difference. In the first place this is because exchanges with Washington on African affairs tend to be as poorly developed as those with Beijing. Second, European energy and mining companies maintain that – for the time being – they have a harder time competing with US counterparts than with Chinese. Third, this will add to China's distrust and complicate coordination even more. Last, it does not make sense to form a tacit alliance against China's growing clout without trying to compete first. Europe in particular has asserted too easily that it does not make a change to compete with China because it ties big loans to resources-for-infrastructure barter. There is no ethical or economic cause that prevents Europe from doing the same, though. What explains China's progress is not the very formula, but the fact that it has a virtual monopoly over it. The main objective should thus be to find ways to stay in the game, rather than to stage some tacit balancing act. Fourth, Europe might just be too divided to streamline strategies across the Atlantic. Some member states have already made it clear that working with China in Africa is more lucrative than resisting it. Balancing is thus neither desirable nor feasible.

Both Europe and the US should anticipate that what happens in Africa is a reflection of the changing global order. India, Brazil, South Africa, the Gulf States, and others will all try to secure a part of the pie and there is no indication that those emerging powers are more inclined to buy into the inconsistent European/Western norms. If a new scramble for Africa is to be avoided, Europe and the US should support the role of regional and sub-regional organizations in setting standards for all Africa's partners. Attempts by the African Union have not yet taken off, but merit sustained support.

It would be in the interest of the US to encourage the EU to develop a more solid and consistent security policy towards Africa. This implies a greater contribution to peacekeeping, maritime security, the combat against the illicit trade in small arms, humanitarian relief, and the tackling of organized crime and terrorism. If Europe is to weigh on the emerging powers, it will be through a greater security role in its neighbourhood, not via a thin global engagement. The more it has to offer to distant partners of Africa in terms of security, the more it could demand in return and assist African initiatives to consolidate. It does not make sense to request Europe to play a more active role in maritime power plays in the Pacific, if it does not have the credibility to play a constructive security role in instable areas closer to home.

This briefing note is based on the following research papers:

Holslag, Jonathan, 2012. China's Evolving Behaviour in Africa and the Options of Cooperation with Europe. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 40, 4, pp. 3-16;

Holslag, Jonathan, 2011. China and the Coups: Coping with Political Instability in Africa. *African Affairs*, 110, 440, pp. 367-386;

Holslag, Jonathan, 2011. The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49, 2, pp. 293-313;

Holslag, Jonathan, 2008. Commerce and Prudence: Revising China's Evolving Africa Policy. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 8, 3, pp. 325-352.