



Policy Briefs#1

A CAS2018Publication

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17 Years of FOCAC: Why Strategy Matters for Ghana and Africa¹

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Summary

In the last two decades Africa-China relations in key sectors have deepened. The evidence for this is most compelling in the area of economics. 2012 data indicates that the value of trade between Africa and China rose from around US\$100million in 2000 to a staggering US\$198.49billion in 2012



reflecting a year-on-year growth of 19.3% over the period.¹ The volumes of trade are equally telling. Africa-China trade as a volume of Africa's total trade volume rose from 3.82% in 2000 to 16.13% in 2012. The devil however is in the details. Disaggregation of the impressive data shows for example that in the main Africa has been a source of raw materials for China while the Asian country has been an exporter of manufactures to the continent. Some have taken this and other facts favouring China to postulate an exploitative relationship with Africa reminiscent of that between an imperium and its vassals and proceeded to blame and hold the Chinese government accountable for this.

This brief will argue that beyond the blame narrative(a key part of the copious literature on contemporary Africa-China relations) the time has come for Ghana and Africa to take a deeper, active strategic approach to FOCAC in the pursuit of clear-cut far-reaching transformative goals such as industrialization.

¹ The brief draws on the deliberations of the First CAS-FOCAC Roundtable held at the University of Ghana on the 26th of April, 2018. It draws heavily as well on Amoah(2018) and a plethora of other publications on FOCAC.

Introduction

When the 7th Forum on China-Africa Co-operation(FOCAC) opens in Beijing on the 3rd of September, 2018, 17 years(just a month short of 18years) will have elapsed since the first forum(see **Table 1**) was held in the same Chinese capital in 2000(Oct. 10-12, 2000). It is instructive to note that the idea to have such a forum between the continent(Africa) with arguably the greatest human resource, economic and other potentials and the nation(China) with the most political and economic global impact in contemporary times was mooted by an African envoy. While Chinese foreign ministry officials pushed hard to flesh out the idea,it took some time for the State Council(SC)² to warm to it . Once the SC became convinced about the utility of such interactions FOCAC was born. The SC consequently set in train a dense network(See **Table 2**) of powerful institutions to superintend and manage China's participation in FOCAC.

What is in it for Africa?- Past FOCACs, the 7th FOCAC and Xi Jinping's 4631 Idea

The emergence of the FOCAC process in 2000 will both coincide and further inspire an unprecedented spike in Africa-Asia relations(especially at the level of economics) with China at the fulcrum. It is not surprising therefore that in the last two decades Africa-China relations in key sectors have deepened. The evidence for this is most compelling in the area of trade. 2012 data indicates that the value of trade between Africa and China rose from around US\$100m in 2000 to a staggering US\$198.49 billion in 2012 reflecting a year-on-year growth of 19.3% over the period. The volumes of trade are equally telling. Africa-China trade as a volume of Africa's total trade volume rose from 3.82% in 2000 to 16.13% in 2012. The devil however is in the details. Disaggregation of the impressive data shows clearly that in the main Africa has been a source of raw materials for China³ while the Asian country has been an exporter of manufactures to the continent. The obvious reality

² This is China's most powerful policy formation body.

³ Geda,A.(2018). The emerging pattern of African economic engagement with China and the rising South: implications for Africa's structural transformation. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jae/ejy015>

here is Africa's de-industrialization which in the last three decades has become acute as industrial policy has become de-emphasized. My view is that African nations must begin to use FOCAC⁴ as a strategic forum for their industrialization⁵. The 7th FOCAC presents such an opportunity given that this will be President Xi Jinping's first participation in the forum at the summit level⁶ since taking office in 2012.

The China's president's 4631 idea (which seeks to re-caliberate Africa-China relations pivoted around FOCAC) reflects a veiled intent to put Africa's industrialization on the agenda which African countries need to grasp. 4 represents the foundations of sincerity, real results, affinity and good faith upon which the relations between the two partners is built (anchored on China's understanding); 6 captures the major projects in the areas of industry, finance, poverty reduction, ecological and environmental protection, cultural and people-to-people exchanges as well as peace and security that China seeks to pursue in Africa; 1 points to the central place of the FOCAC process while 3 expresses China's interest in supporting Africa's high-speed railway, highway and regional aviation networks. The historic moment is also serendipitous. Rising labour costs in China (and with it the move towards more hi-tech production) require an estimated 85million⁷ labour intensive manufacturing jobs to be shed off. Ghana and African nations must use the 7th FOCAC to make the strategic case to reap the bounty that this vacuum presents.

Under Ghana's President Akufo-Addo a clear focus on the West African nation's rapid industrialization has been elaborated within the **"Ghana Beyond Aid"** vision. Ghana's policymakers should be thinking hard about how the 7th FOCAC can be utilized effectively to realize such a bold and necessary ambition by taking a good slice of the 85million jobs on offer. To be sure the loftiest ideas do not mean much

⁴ Previous FOCACs have gestured towards the Africa's industrialization question but have done so more implicitly than explicitly (see Amoah, 2018).

⁵ Here I must make it clear that I contemplate industrialization in terms of the technical and technological capacity and know-how to produce for intelligent consumption taking into sensitive consideration the long term sustenance of the biosphere in the age of the Anthropocene. In other words I canvass for smart industrialization.

⁶ <http://focacsummit.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zt/t1587375.htm>

⁷ Lin, J. (2018). China's rise and opportunity for structural transformation in Africa. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jae/ejv012>

until they are translated or translatable into the tangible and empirical. This requires clearly dedicated personnel (well-trained⁸) and resources (pecuniary, power, logistical and institutional); what I will describe as the well-oiled institutional infrastructure. Africa can learn from the Chinese model here given the blinding range of personnel and resources she has sunk into engaging Africa.

The theme for the 7th FOCAC is "***China and Africa: toward an even stronger community with a shared future through win-win cooperation.***" Are African nations ready for building a shared future through win-win co-operation with China? Their strategies and time will tell.

⁸ The author has met several high ranking officials (including foreign ministers) across Africa in charge of their countries' relations with China who have but a passing knowledge of Chinese culture, history, economy, society and language (Mandarin).

Table 1: FOCAC Meetings in the last 17 years

Forum on China-Africa Co-operation(FOCAC)			
Type of Conference	Year	Host	Key Textual Outcomes
Inaugural Ministerial Conference	Oct. 10-12, 2000	Beijing, China	Programme for China-Africa Cooperation in Economic and Social Development
2 nd Ministerial Conference	Dec.15-16,2003	Addis Ababa, Ethiopia	Addis Ababa Action Plan (2004-2006).
3 rd Ministerial Conference and Summit	Nov.4-6, 2006	Beijing, China	Beijing Action Plan (2007-2009)
4 th Ministerial Conference	Nov.-8-9,2009	Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt	Sharm el-Sheikh Action Plan (2010-2012)
5 th Ministerial Conference	July 19-20, 2012	Beijing, China	Beijing Action Plan (2013-2015)
6 th Ministerial Conference	Dec.-3-5,2015	Johannesburg, South Africa	Johannesburg Action Plan(2016-2018)

Table 2: China' FOCAC Follow-up Mechanism

INSTITUTIONS		
Ministries	Councils, Commissions and other Organizations	Banks
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	International Department of the CPC Central Committee	People's Bank of China
Ministry of Commerce	National Development and Reform Commission	China Development Bank
Ministry of Finance	National Health and Family Planning Commission	Export-Import Bank of China
Ministry of Culture	General Administration of Customs	Bank of China
Ministry of Education	General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine	
Ministry of Science and Technology	State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television	
Ministry of Industry and Information Technology	National Tourism Administration	
Ministry of Land and Resources	Information Office of the State Council	
Ministry of Environmental Protection	Chinese Communist Youth League	
Ministry of Transport	China Council for Promotion of International Trade	
Ministry of Agriculture	People's Government of Beijing Municipality	

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† Information Office of the State Council data on China-Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation (2013)