

Harnessing the dragon's powers...

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THE third ministerial Forum on China-Africa Co-operation (Focac) takes place this weekend in Beijing. Held every three years, the forum has become a significant platform for strengthening Sino-African ties. Since its inception in 2000 and the Addis Ababa meeting in 2003, relations have been augmented by Beijing's increased diplomatic and economic engagement across the African continent.

Within the framework of the forum, Africa's strategic importance in China's foreign policy cannot be ignored. This is reflected in what has become a new impulse in Africa's sustainable development process, and can be amply demonstrated by the following facts and figures.

China's trade volume with the continent has increased exponentially, from about \$5.6bn in 1999 to about \$40bn last year. Beijing has forgiven about \$1.3bn in debt of 31 African countries and trained more than 10000 African personnel in civilian and security sectors.

Moreover, it has granted zero tariff ratings for 190 products exported to Beijing from sub-Saharan economies and, at the end of last year, had invested a total of \$1.25bn across the continent, ranging from energy and infrastructure projects to the emergence of approximately 700 Chinese-operated businesses in African economies.

Beijing has also become a partner in the United Nations peacekeeping operations on the continent, contributing several hundred peacekeepers to operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia.

Under the African Humanitarian Resource Development Fund, established after the first forum in 2000, the Chinese government has provided about 1200 scholarships a year for Africans to study in China, dispatched about 16000 doctors to work in Africa's rural areas between 2000 and 2005, and deployed 700 teachers to African schools.

More recently, through a memorandum of understanding signed with the secretariat of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, the Chinese government made a \$500m donation to the secretariat for medical purposes.

Certainly these engagements will look set to grow as Focac entrenches Sino-African relations.

But critics have not been encouraged by such prospects.

According to reports and analysis by commentators from within and outside the continent, African-Chinese relations represent an asymmetrical relationship that resembles the classic north-south model of exporting raw material while importing manufactured goods — a model which Focac embeds.

While at a cursory glance this may appear to be the case, one cannot deny that China's booming economy and growing appetite for raw materials to sustain this economic growth has been a boon for mineral-enriched African countries. It has created a surge in the global price of commodities, which in turn has meant healthy returns for those African countries in terms of the commodity windfall.

While only a narrow base of countries are benefiting from China's commodity hunger, it nevertheless poses questions as to whether these African governments are optimising the revenues to diversify their economies towards manufacturing and services in order to generate sustained growth in the medium term.

Obviously, this leads to two contentious and interrelated issues that impact on China's political and economic engagements in Africa.

First, given China's competitiveness, which has led to a growing trade surplus with the majority of its African trading partners, concerns are mounting about whether China's economic engagement in Africa is purely extractive or developmental in its impact.

Second is the concerning issue of noninterference and respect for sovereignty in countries where economic interests prop up unsavoury political regimes. This is where Focac's substantive engagement can be realised.

With Africa representing a diverse set of interests in Focac, African leaders will do well to recognise that there are opportunities that can be used to make the Chinese government more receptive to Africa's democratic and development challenges.

To this end, Africa should not become complacent that China will deliver it from its development problems. Instead, African governments must use the upcoming Focac meeting to push for a more inclusive agenda, and one which deals with some of the backlash associated with China's political and economic engagements across the continent.

The agenda could include more technology transfer, skills development, acceptable labour conditions, and overall upliftment in the socio-economic livelihood of Africa's citizenry. Clearly, if Africa is going to be an equal partner in Focac, then the onus rests on Africa's leaders to develop a partnership with China that represents the interests of Africa's citizenry and not only those of its political and economic elites.

While it is convenient for African governments to see China as an alternative source of engagement to that of its traditional development partners, they must not overlook the threats that could result in this partnership being exploitative.

African leaders have the history of past experience to realise that any substantive engagement in Africa's development trajectory must incorporate a robust discussion on how the continent's sustainable development programme can be more meaningful.

As the weekend ministerial meeting approaches, the relationship between Africa and China holds great potential for African economies. But the impetus is for African leaders at Focac 2006 to find the right balance between what is pragmatic for its development — and not ask for prestigious projects like new conference venues or presidential palaces.

Understanding that China is seeking to forge ahead with a reputation for being a responsible power in global affairs gives African governments the space to negotiate viable development interactions that are mutually beneficial, and mainstream the interests of Africa's citizenry.

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