

China checks into Africa with 'Chequebook' diplomacy

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China has out maneuvered everybody else in the strategic calculations with respect to cultivating relationships with Africa. In the recently concluded, fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) on China-Africa strategic partnership, the President Hu Jintao pledged \$20 billion of credit line for African countries in next three years — double the amount what China promised to lend Africa at the last joint forum three years ago.

Addressing the delegates at FOCAC, the Chinese president Hu Jintao stated that “Chinese and African people have always treated each other as equals with sincerity and friendship”. Hu also condemned any kind of external interference, a direct criticism on western policies and interferences in Africa and elsewhere.

This carries particular importance as western world has actively participated in the Arab spring. These uprisings have wider repercussions in authoritarian China as the country has witnessed people's uprisings at unprecedented levels in recent years.

Emphasising the importance of increased assistance to Africa, Hu announced that China will build more technology demonstration centres and implement the “African Talents Program”, build cultural and vocational skills training facilities and send 1500 medical personnel in next three years to boost the new type of China-Africa strategic partnership.

Apart from development assistance, China also promised to initiate the ‘China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security’ and train African armed forces and peace-keepers, implying more Chinese boots in Africa, above the UN mandated system.

The past few years have seen the most robust high-level exchanges between China and Africa as Beijing has engaged Africa quite seriously. Hu visited Africa four times covering 18 African countries. About 30 African heads of state or government and 20 speakers of parliament visited China from 2007 to 2011.

Chinese business model in Africa, linking aid, trade and investment involves extensive infrastructure projects, granting loans as a mean to access natural resources and trade expansion. China’s aid to Africa has expanded rapidly as the continent has become a major source of oil from Sudan and Angola, and copper from Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In 2011, trade between China and Africa reached \$166.3bn, an increase of 16 times from the 2000 level making China the largest trading partner of Africa. Over 2000 Chinese enterprises are doing businesses in 50 African countries.

India’s or even US’ bilateral trade, investment and aid with Africa pale in comparison to those of China particularly in growth terms.

Though India has started to engage Africa seriously since last few years, China’s economic hard power capabilities have successfully blocked Indian investment in Africa’s primary sector, especially in critical countries such as Angola, Algeria, Zambia, Sudan etc.

Led by a vibrant private sector, India’s bilateral trade with Africa has grown rapidly in recent years — from around \$1bn in 2001 to about \$50 billion last year, the country’s officials are now targeting \$70bn by 2015.

Like China, India is turning to Africa as it seeks to diversify its energy supplies in order to support its booming economy. In the landmark India-Africa Forum

Summit in 2011, the second since 2008, India offered a \$5bn loans package to Africa as well as \$700mon for new institutions and training programs. It will be a misnomer to compare India and China in Africa.

Though India is trying to catch up with China in terms of geopolitical influence, it cannot match Beijing's political and economic influence in the continent. The presence of high-profile Chinese ventures on the continent further challenges India's cultivation of strategic ties with Africa: a situation which could eventually impact on India's energy security, given its dependency on African resources.

Many in the western world criticise China's African policy. The European Union calls China's business with Africa as "chequebook" diplomacy.

Echoing the similar views, US secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton, in her recent eleven days African tour of covering at least seven nations, urged African nations to embrace democracy and partnerships with responsible foreign powers. African countries are in a dilemma in these geostrategic games. Many African countries are doubtful about Chinese real intentions. Chinese state-owned firms in Africa face criticism for using imported labour to build government-financed projects and over exploitation of resources. This dilemma was reverberated in speeches of African leaders in the conference. According Jacob Zuma, "this kind of (resource based) trade is unsustainable in the long term and need to be cautious when entering into new partnerships". But, for sure many African countries do appreciate the Chinese no-strings approach to aid.

FOCAC also called for reforms in international institutions and global economic governance as unreformed institutions is a major constraint to Africa's development. African countries announced their support to the BRICS countries in setting up a new development bank, a contradictory move challenging the IMF and World Bank dominated economic system.

What drives China into Africa can be classified into three categories, strategic — to acquire oil and strategic metals, business — market for Chinese products and political — nurture partnerships including for military support in future.

Ultimately, Chinese were successful in conveying the African countries that China is also a developing country and can serve them better by sharing its development experiences that reflects the spirit of South-South cooperation.

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