

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF
FOCAC FOR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY



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In extending our discussion from analysis of FOCAC media-based and civil society dimensions, we have touched on a number of limitations that stand in the way of Chinese public diplomacy towards Africa. There is however room to go back to the FOCAC documents with a view to making generic observations on their implications for Chinese public diplomacy in Africa.

Obviously, because our analysis at this point is based on official documents/event, it is much harder to identify the potentially negative aspects of FOCAC as a public diplomacy platform. It would indeed be foolhardy for Chinese strategists to negotiate themselves out of favorability by openly showing their hand over “hard” matters during FOCAC conferences.

However, we can take it that because the FOCAC documents detail very specific, direct and tangible plans of action, every seemingly “China soft” attribute can be read in reverse as a “China hard” attribute. Indeed, the

boldness with which some statements are made, such as all Africans supporting the BRICS, might be contested for instance if one considers South Africa’s (the sole African representative in the BRICS) politico-economic competition with Nigeria.

There is a notable focus on the problem areas of the China-Africa relations: consular, illegal migrations and customs and standards issues. These are indeed issues that have been critically framed in China-Africa relations. On these issues, we see the wording of the FOCAC documents turning mildly commanding as evident in statements such as: ‘the two sides will take concrete and necessary measures to protect the life, property, assets as well as rights and interests of the people and businesses from each side’ and ‘push forward negotiations and implementation of bilateral agreements on promoting and protecting investment, foster an enabling investment environment and safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of investors of both sides’.

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Indeed, the mere fact of allocation of appreciable space to plans for cooperation in the legal and judicial fields might be a circuitous indication of areas of conflict in an otherwise ratcheting engagement.

While a public diplomacy perspective is evident in China, the larger partner, rolling out strategies for balanced trade with Africa and zero rating of tariffs on goods from African LDCs, this same positive attribute could be seen as admission of inequality in a situation where the relations are predicated on equality and mutual benefits.

Chinese donations to Africa may serve a public diplomacy function in that Africa would be attracted to China. While plans such as those calculated at correcting the imbalanced trade between China in Africa or the many forms of assistances may be seen from a public diplomacy prism, they could also be seen as inducements. By their nature, inducements would be read as China gaining unfair advantage and therefore turn into negative attributes. Promulgations such as the call for a

more just international system are directed towards supposed African disillusionment with the West. This tacit threat to and for the West might enjoy traction in African countries disenchanted with the West, but this does not mean all African countries are in such of such inclination. The African nations that enjoy even a mere modicum of good relations with the West might quietly disagree with this position and probably see it as China using Africa to equal scores on the international stage.

Issues to do with the strengthening democracy and good governance, opposition to the interference in Africa's internal affairs by external forces and a re-interpretation of human rights to put premium on economic rather than political rights can be double barreled. Similarly, China's use of its position in the UN to defend certain African interests might not have uniform acceptance and therefore be seen with hard power lenses.

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While the FOCAC documents place the policy of non-interference at the heart of the ideological underpinnings of the relations, some African countries might see intervention in the internal affairs of other countries as necessary. For instance, several African countries have their armies in Somalia, fighting terrorism under a UN and AU banner, which is very much an interventionist development. Indeed China itself is involved in counter-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden and in waters off the coast of Somalia, a salutary activity which nonetheless could be interpreted as China seeking military expansion. We can thus conclude that an even finer and detailed analysis of the non-interference principle bears complexities that could be seen from negative viewpoints with potentially negative implications for Chinese media and diplomacy towards Africa. A second challenge, which is more latent than really important is with regards to the “One China” dimension of the non-interference policy. As Gazibo and Mbabia (2012:68) point

out ‘the exclusion from FOCAC of African countries which still recognize the Republic of China (Taiwan) illustrates’ Chinese conditions and indicates that certain matters internal to China are non-negotiable. This in turn reflects poorly on China notwithstanding the rationality of PRC on those internal conflicts.

While it is possible that African countries genuinely and inherently “love” China as seen in the language of camaraderie in the FOCAC documents, it is also possible that they gravitate towards China with an eye on the dangling carrot. For instance, while literature indicates that African nations are critical of the trade imbalance in favor of China, the announcement by China at the FOCAC 2012 conference to correct this imbalance (e.g. zero rating of tariffs on African exports to China) encourages the said African countries to continue doing business with China. In other circumstances, African countries could take a trade protectionist stance, for instance.

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At surface level, attractiveness, as used in the current paper, may seem like African nations being prepared to follow China because they are awed by, say, its economic model. On closer examination however, China is a magnet for Africa because it is able to structure so many deals so that African nations – their relative poverty and all – are prepared to swallow the bait. A telling example in these respects is the US\$20 billion credit line announced by former Chinese president Hu Jintao at the FOCAC V conference in July 2012. It is perhaps for this reason that African leaders are prepared to go along with Chinese demands on issues such as the one-China policy – which is openly declared at consecutive FOCAC conferences.

In terms of ideology, which subsumes politics, values and ideals, it is worthwhile noting that most African nations follow a Western governance ideology. China however operates under a fairly different governance system, known as socialism with Chinese characteristics. This is a

potential area of divergence between a number of African nations and China. However, it is a smart strategy for China to present the bogeyman of developed West and underdeveloped south thus introducing a geopolitical dimension. The south-north geopolitical divide presents a smart opportunity for African leaders to accept and endorse Chinese foreign policy principles and to agree on other global issues such as the need to accentuate economic rights over human rights at this juncture in the development of the two regions.

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**SPECIAL REPORT
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