

SHAPING AFRICA-CHINA COOPERATION IN THE EVOLVING WORLD SECURITY ORDER

Mikatekiso Kubayi

Researcher, Institute for Global Governance Associated with UNISA, South Africa

Africa and China have a long relationship spanning over 1200 years, covering various epochs. This relationship has evolved with time, from infrequent contact during earlier, less technologically advanced times to frequent and strategic in today's globalized and much-complicated world. But these relations do not occur in a vacuum. Africa and China are both actors in the current geopolitical and economic landscapes. While China has reached the point of nearly realizing its goal of creating a moderately prosperous society, Africa, too, though less grand in scale, has seen its own rise in the geopolitical landscape and a steady growth of its economy.

AFRICA, MULTILATERALISM, AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION

There are many entry points in a conversation about Africa-China relations. For this conversation, the geopolitical landscape and its influence on the evolving nature of multilateralism and its governance architecture on security and finance offer a good frame. This is because the current and future Africa-China relations are closely related to the rise of both China and the Global South and their role and influence on a reform of multilateralism. The much debated and often agreed upon need for reforms is to achieve greater equity in global governance, greater representativity and legitimacy, and greater agency of the Global South over security and financial architecture that affect them.

The UN Charter explicitly discusses the role of the

United Nations (UN) in promoting and maintaining peace, conflict resolution, conflict prevention, and promoting good relations between states to avoid wars. Africa has had a less than satisfactory record of "conflict-lessness". With the numerous conflicts currently being resolved, many agreements and pacts have been concluded between various parties, many of which have yet to be sustained. Despite the decades of UN presence in peacekeeping matters in Africa, its growing population expected to reach 2.5 billion by 2050, its growing economy, and the challenge of violent extremism preying on underdevelopment and poverty, Africa still does not have a single state among the P5 of the UN Security Council (UNSC).

Africa needs to attain its equitable space at the decision-making tables of global governance. It has continued to be a recipient of decisions, often calamitous to regional stability and development, such as the case of Libya. In another challenging failure of the global governance system, its financial architecture continues to fail to heed Africa's long repeated call for unified action to arrest illicit financial flows. The most recent vote on a global position on tax matters, resolution A/C.2/78/L.18/Rev.1 on the promotion of inclusive and effective international tax cooperation at the UN General Assembly (UNGA), displayed the dichotomy between developed and developing economies in full view of the concerned populations of the Global South.

This has been the nature of multilateralism before the rise of the Global South. It is a multilateralism designed in the mid-40s by states wielding the most power, military, and finance without developing economies'

voices or contributions in the design. It is a design that has presided over the numerous conflicts of the past decades without success. It is a design that has yet to succeed in shedding the globe of the harmful legacy of colonialism, which today continues to see illicit financial flows, flowing out of the continent the much-needed resources for its development. It is a multilateralism that today has allowed the construct of great power competition with Africa as a theatre.

The United States (US) has passed some legislation to contain China's rise as a technological and military power. It has also passed legislation to curtail the "influence of Russia" on Africa in what it may determine to be malign, as if to assert that Africa lacks the agency and maturity to determine its own relations for its development. Africa continues to see the extraction of crucial minerals for current and future technologies.

Development finance is important for collective human security. The UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development acknowledges the importance of development in preventing violent extremism and conflict. The African Development Bank (ADB) estimates a need for more than \$200 Billion in infrastructure investment in Africa for its development, both to catch up and propel it into the future. If the estimated 2.5 billion population holds true access to high-quality education and health, access to consumables, access to jobs and attaining a higher Human Development Index (HDI) must be financed. Africa's self-reliance, productive capacity, technological capability, and industrialization, among other instruments to generate dignity for its population, will need to be financed. Africa's security and stability will need to be financed.

AFRICA-CHINA RELATIONS IN A MULTILATERALISM OF THE FUTURE

Development and security are important features of multilateralism and certainly a multilateralism of the future. According to its proponents, This system of global relations will be based not on power and force but on collaboration and the freedom of each people(s) to pursue a development path of their own choosing independently. Among the features of the multilateralism of the future are equity in global governance, improved access to knowledge for developing economies, and a reformed financial and security architecture. These are not merely

the age-old goals of many in the Global South but proposed shifts in a 2023 UN High-Level Advisory Panel report. Africa-China relations have much opportunity and space to evolve in the context of the Global South's rise in future multilateralism and the pursuit of African continental interests.

The role of China in the ascendance of Africa is played out in multiple perspectives. For this conversation, two, political and economic, provide a brief context. In the pursuit of development and to realize the aspiration of and the renaissance of an "Africa we Want" in the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063, 15 flagship projects have been proposed. One of them is the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This initiative needs other efforts to bear fruit for its success. Such initiatives would include the up-scaling of productive capacity and technological capabilities for the localization of production, the generation of regional value chains, and greater investment in Research and Development (R&D).

According to the UN's Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 2023 World Investment Report, China is Africa's fifth largest source of FDIs behind the United Kingdom (UK), France, Netherlands, and the US. South Africa is the sixth largest source of FDIs in what constitutes a collective 3.5 % of global FDIs. This is important because attaining the objective of improving the African population's economic well-being is important for reducing violent extremism and conflict. It is also important in lieu of the calls for increased domestic resource mobilization to fund AU programs such as peace-keeping operations and general self-reliance.

Given the development needs, finance, and security, among other dimensions, development partnerships are important. However, the continent must exercise its agency to best defined and negotiate such partnerships at strategic or other levels to attain the best possible outcomes. China has, at least publicly, often argued for each country and region to pursue a development path suitable for its specific material conditions and reality, that each country and region design systems and policies and extract partnerships it needs for these systems and policies, according to its independently set priorities. China is also often argued in discourse to prefer quite strong non-interference in others' sovereign spaces or internal affairs.

But China is also at the receiving end of the debt-trap narratives. Despite having recently announced a

waiver for the debt of 17 African states, the narratives have lingered. According to Dr Akinwumi Adeshina, the President of the African Development Bank at the Paris Club in June 2023, African debt to China had been on a speedy rise to 14% of Africa's \$1.1 Trillion external debt. 86% of the remaining debt is split between multilateral and bilateral arrangements, such as IMF, World Bank, and country-to-country arrangements. According to some scholars, the Chinese military is minuscule, and its security presence tends to follow the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. However, some commentators argue that despite having just 1 military base in Djibouti, private Chinese security contractors represent a state security presence considering the Chinese governance system.

By comparison, the US has 34 known military outposts on the continent. The AU Peace and Security Council has already expressed concern over the number of foreign military bases and the establishment of new ones. There has been a rise in resistance to French presence in the west of the continent and the Sahel. There has also been discourse on the presence of Russia on the continent with a direct legislative response from the US, the Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act of 2022. But, of course, this has been just one of the many acts in great power competition for Africa. This competition goes beyond Africa as a strategic theatre.

The Indo-Pacific has also been of particular strategic importance in recent times. The disagreements between the US and China on the Taiwan question, the formation of the QUAD group, and tensions over the South China Sea have received priority attention. Other areas of competition that have enjoyed similar attention include regional multilateral trade pacts, the erstwhile proposed Build Back Better World (BBBW), the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and now the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have taken center stage of geopolitical and security discourse.

Other issues with both potential economic and security dimensions include the expansion of the BRICS bloc of countries to include the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Islamic Republic of Iran, Egypt, and Ethiopia. This has been a major global development of 2023 that sees the group expand into the Middle East and gain in population size, economic size, potential, and strategic value such as energy production. With the many conflicts within and without the continent, the production and proliferation of arms, especially small arms, would continue to be a concern.



Despite all these challenges, the mood and momentum for reform of the multilateral system and the emergence of a new world order seem to continue unhindered. Many repeated calls and motivation for the reform of the UN system at virtually all aspects, including the UNSC, have been received by the Secretary General of the UN, Antonio Guterres. This momentum coincides with the increasing potency of the growing voice of the Global South, effectively its rise, as some have argued. This rise is not without merit. It is a rise that is argued to have been a long time coming, given the nature of global governance and financial and security architecture that has ignored the important voices of many and the potential valuation contributions of developing economies since 1945. However, this is a current but evolving multilateralism within which Africa-China relations will continue to evolve with strategic intent.

AFRICAN AGENCY IN ITS ENGAGEMENT WITH CHINA AND OTHERS

Africa was given a significant reminder of the state of multilateralism, “the rules-based order”, and the current



Photo: Xinhua

Exhibitors attending the third China-Africa Economic and Trade Expo present their products to visitors at the Changsha International Convention and Exhibition Center, June 29, 2023.

state of global solidarity on humanity's pressing issues by the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic is one of the collective human security threats that can be argued to constitute a polypandemic. Some scholars have argued that the polypandemic has not only arrived but possibly poses an epic challenge for global solidarity for urgent solutions in the interests of humanity.

At its worst, the pandemic needed international cooperation in developing an urgent vaccine, in which Africa participated. Africa could not procure the eventual vaccine because some developed economies had bought up to five times their needs, hogging in what has now become known by many as vaccine nationalism. In the early periods of vaccine production, China and Russia were leading providers of vaccines such as Sputnik V and Sinovac, mostly in the form of donations. The 2020 Munich Security Conference report describes a polypandemic as a collective of pandemics, including COVID-19, that threaten humanity in similar measures, such as poverty & inequalities, climate change, and even nationalism.

Another report on threats to human security indicates the waning ability of states to address challenges faced by their populations. A report by the National Intelligence

Council of the US, titled "Global Trends 2040", suggests that within a 40-year period, one possible scenario includes the eventual inability of states to attend or remedy challenges faced by their citizens leading to widespread frustration, a rise in social movements and accompanying protests as has already begun across the globe and other challenges such as states seeking different sources and avenues of power.

On its end, China has adopted, refined, and perfected the art of long-term planning to resolve challenges. The 20th National Conference of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has not only begun implementing its strategic plan for 2020 to 2035 but has already laid its strategic plan through the middle of this century. The 14th National People's Congress of China has worked to legislate to support attaining the set goals as per the respective long-term plans. However, the significance of the confidence the Chinese system displays is the constant emphasis on developing policies and adopting actions to suit its own material conditions. It is an apt example of the exercise of agency. The five-year plans aim not only to foster development planning for China based on its domestic conditions but also to influence how it projects foreign policy as a reflection of its domestic policy.

What is, of course, important for Africa to note and define for itself is the adoption by China of a "dual circulation" policy comprising the development of the domestic market while fully maintaining its vigor in the global market as such that the two complement each other. Development, poverty eradication, a green economy, territorial integrity, security, and technological advancement have attracted many to partner and trade with China. As China continues its path to what it describes as modernization, Africa, in its exercise of agency, has an opportunity to determine what synergies and collaborations can be leveraged for its own advantage and what can work best for its own material conditions, realities, and priorities.

UNEVEN POST-COVID ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT ASPIRATIONS

Africa, as do other regions of this globalised world, needs genuine development partnerships, sensitive to the unique needs and priorities of Africa for the attainment of The Africa We Want by 2063. Many states on the continent, as is a general tendency in the Global South, have chosen to be non-aligned. Not passive, but non-aligned,

and preferring to work with all potential partners on the basis of mutual respect and equality. This has been a positive response in a period of great power competition and a new scramble for Africa. So the task of seeking, developing and shaping a genuine development partnership is a noble assignment of the agents of Africa's people. These development partnerships, with China and others alike, require the best in agency.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on how societies interact has seen massive and unequal injections of finance into weak economies funded by a mix of sources, including debt. It is necessary to reflect on the driving ideas and agenda behind foreign policy and security strategies of the globe's leading powers and prepare accordingly. The COVID-19 pandemic has already tested partnerships and collaborations when they are most urgent during the global crisis. The global economy came close to a complete halt, with the movement of goods and people brought to the bare minimum. This has had a devastating impact on the world economy and developing economies the most.

While developing economies are already grappling with the many challenges of underdevelopment and dwindling covers of financing for already challenging and competing needs, the pandemic made the reality more daunting. This section of the world economy did not have adequate resources to deploy countermeasures, such as stimulus packages, for a swift and robust recovery. On the other hand, developed economies have had a huge stimulus package deployed to counter the impact of the pandemic and ensure a robust recovery. The world's



The Laboratory Building of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention headquarters project.

largest economies received above 70% of the IMF's \$650 Billion SDR disbursement as a countermeasure. A genuine development partnership would consider this: the remarks of the UN Secretary-General on reforms, the history of partnership, and, of course, the needs of the 15 flagship projects of the AU (continental interests).

At the heart of these issues is the need for urgent preparedness of states to meet challenges and address them to the satisfaction of their people and humanity. The case of Africa specifically and those of states in the Global South generally are particularly of concern. This concern covers current inequalities between individuals, societies, civilizations, and states. African states and those in the Global South must catch up and access technologies that continue to drive modernization and finance to drive development, including state capacities.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

A useful emergent concept in response to the polypandemic is anticipatory governance. While it is early to speak of global anticipatory governance given the weaknesses exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it could be a worthwhile concept to explore at state and regional levels, particularly SADC in South Africa's case and ECOWAS in the case of Nigeria. Although collective planning and integration are at its core in a regional context, such a concept must be accompanied by response capabilities and a strong ethic for collective action. The agenda for UN reform can also be drawn from this argument, especially from the US Global Trends 2040 report, among others, for a reform based on equity to fully realize a better multilateralism at that level.

Emphasis on industrialization on the continent, the development of productive capacities, increased R&D, including joint or collaborative work, localization of production, the development of regional value chains, and increased access to global value chains should be at the core of bilateral and multilateral arrangements. China is fast becoming the global leader in technological innovation. It has managed to remove hundreds of millions of people from poverty, and its governance is based on a strong meritocracy that has earned a strong reputation for its success and its emphasis on appropriate policies and actions for local realities and conditions as well as noninterference in sovereign affairs all provide an opportunity to negotiate strong partnerships for development. 🇨🇳