

DEVELOPMENT OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND CHINA-AFRICA COOPERATION

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China-Africa relations are the bedrock of the foundation of China's diplomacy. In the international cooperation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Africa cooperation plays a fundamental role and becomes a highlight, which is seen not only in the "matter" but also the "manner" of China and Africa's joint efforts to develop the BRI. "Matter" hereby refers to the remarkable achievements and "manner" refers to the progress and approaches. As for the "matter", a large number of research outcomes are already in place both in China and abroad, while the investigation into the "manner" is relatively limited. It is critical to review the progress made in China-Africa joint development of the BRI and further explore the specific approaches and highlights of China-Africa cooperation within the BRI framework so as to deepen the joint BRI development in the future.

THE PROGRESS MADE IN CHINA-AFRICA JOINT DEVELOPMENT OF THE BRI

Since the proposal of the BRI in 2013, the vision of the BRI has given rise to action and become a reality with concrete implementation in Africa, marked by the Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road issued in 2015 and the convening of the Johannesburg Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Ever since then, China-Africa cooperation has become part of the BRI framework.

Based on the changes and evolution of the relationship between the BRI and China-Africa cooperation, the

implementation of the BRI in Africa can be divided into two successive stages. The first is pilot stage, when China-Africa cooperation was not incorporated in the BRI, yet accumulated experience and paved the way for its implementation. The second is the integration and upgrading stage, when China-Africa cooperation enjoys higher strategic positioning in the BRI and serves as a fast track to a large extent.

I. The Pilot Stage

As a top-level design document, the Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road issued in 2015 drew the roadmap for the implantation of BRI. However, the document didn't explicitly identify the position of Africa, indicating that the BRI did not include China-Africa cooperation in the initial stage of planning (2013-2015). But



Children and teenagers on the shores of Lake Rusiwasi, Zambia, welcoming a train from the Tanzam Railway to their home town (taken in 1976).

(Photo/Xinhua)



Photo: Xinhua

President Mwini of Zanzibar, Tanzania, delivers a speech at the opening ceremony of the 3rd China-Africa Business and Trade Expo on June 29, 2023.

in 2014, China specifically proposed the “461” cooperation framework and the construction of “highways, railways, aviation networks, and industrialization” in Africa, both of which were highly consistent with the BRI and had been going on in Africa before the implementation of the BRI. It is fair to say that the existing cooperation between China and Africa has accumulated experience for the planning and implementation of the BRI and, to a large extent, served as the “pilot experiment” of the BRI cooperation.

II. The Integration and Upgrading Stage

After the convening of the FOCAC Johannesburg Summit, the relationship between China-Africa cooperation and the BRI has gradually become clear. China and Africa have planned their cooperation with the BRI in perspective and the positioning of their cooperation has been constantly improved and upgraded in the BRI framework.

In May 2015, Lin Songtian, then Director-General of the Department of African Affairs of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated in an interview that the BRI represented China’s latest measure of opening up and that it is expected to include Africa, which is an extension of the

Maritime Silk Road, in the grand vision of the BRI. In December 2015, China and South Africa signed the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the Government of the Republic of South Africa on Jointly Promoting the Construction of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”, indicating that South Africa became the first African country to join the BRI. In August 2016, after the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) held a symposium on the BRI, Lin Songtian suggested in an interview that Africa, especially eastern and southern Africa, is the historical and natural extension of the Maritime Silk Road. As a critical node of the BRI, Africa represents an important direction and foothold for advancing the BRI westward. During the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) in May 2017, the Chinese government released a document titled *Building the Belt and Road: Philosophy, Practice and China’s Contribution*, which identified Africa as a key partner in jointly advancing the BRI. In September 2018, the FOCAC Beijing Summit was convened, and FOCAC was positioned as the major platform for China-Africa BRI cooperation.

APPROACHES OF CHINA-AFRICA BELT AND ROAD COOPERATION

The “Five Connectivities” are the main content of the BRI and also the macro framework for analyzing the implementation of the BRI. With the late-mover advantage of China-Africa Belt and Road Cooperation and in accordance with the specific conditions and existing situation of the “Five Connectivities”, China and Africa have explored a distinctive and practical approach of cooperation, effectively uplifting the level of connectivity between China and Africa and among African countries.

I.High-Level planning leads “policy communication”

The new era has witnessed the frequent high-level exchanges between China and Africa, which effectively facilitated “policy communication” and built a solid political foundation for China and Africa to jointly advance the BRI. During President Xi Jinping’s first visit to Africa which was also his first trip overseas after assuming office in 2013, he announced the principle of “sincerity, real results, affinity and good faith” and of pursuing the greater good and shared interests for China’s relations with Africa as well as the vision of China-Africa community with a shared future. These new concepts have later become the guiding philosophy of China’s diplomacy towards Africa and provided political guidance for “policy communication” between China and Africa, reflecting the fact that China-Africa cooperation is important, representative and demonstrative.

Guided by the Chinese and African leaders, the BRI, the African Union’s (AU) Agenda 2063 and African countries national development strategies are closely synergized. As the China-Africa comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership is boosted to achieve rapid development, a new pattern of all-round cooperation at multiple levels and in various sectors has been formed. So far, China has signed the BRI cooperation documents with 52 African countries and the AU Commission, making up one third of global BRI cooperation signatories. As one of the most important regions in the joint development of the BRI, Africa has achieved fruitful outcomes in its cooperation with China to advance the BRI.

II. Transportation networks support “infrastructure connectivity”

“Infrastructure connectivity” is a prioritized area for

the BRI development. For a long time, China and African countries have carried out extensive cooperation in constructing transportation infrastructure which has been well recognized and appreciated by the African people. China and Africa choose transportation infrastructure as a breakthrough of “infrastructure connectivity” in their cooperation under the BRI, reflecting the distinctive features of China-Africa cooperation.

Since the proposal of the BRI, with financial and technical support provided by China, African countries have benefited from higher standard infrastructure connectivity. As of now, within the BRI framework, China has built 10,000km standard-gauge railway, 100,000km highway and 100 newly built or renovated ports in Africa. The Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, the Mombasa-Nairobi



The Abuja-Kaduna Railway, the first Chinese-standard railroad on the African continent, in the Nigerian capital.



Idu Railway Station, the starting point of the Akha Railway.

Railway and the Abuja-Kaduna Railway have contributed to closer connectivity on the African continent. The China-Africa cooperation in infrastructure, with the “construction of transportation networks” as a breakthrough, is hailed as the “accelerator” of economic and social development in Africa.

III. Cooperation in establishing industrial parks facilitates “unimpeded trade”

“Unimpeded trade” is an essential part of the BRI development. In consideration of the comparative advantages of China and Africa, production capacity cooperation takes up a prominent position in economic and trade cooperation between China and Africa. In this regard, joint efforts to establish industrial parks represent a salient feature and highlight of China-Africa production capacity cooperation. With constant devotion, China and Africa have jointly established a batch of economic and trade cooperation zones, special economic zones, industrial parks, as well as science and technology parks to attract foreign enterprises, including Chinese enterprises, to invest, establish production and processing bases, and launch localized operations in Africa. Such cooperation helps create more local jobs, generate more taxes and promote industrial upgrading and technological cooperation.

As of now, China has been Africa’s largest trading partner for 14 consecutive years. In 2022, the bilateral trade volume between China and Africa reached 282 billion US dollars, a year-on-year increase of 11.1%. China’s investment stock in Africa has exceeded 56 billion US dollars, doubling that of a decade ago.

IV. Multi-pronged measures push forward “financial integration”

For a long time, insufficiency of funds has imposed restraint on the economic and social development of Africa. Within the BRI framework and in consideration of the features of China-Africa cooperation, China has explored diversified financing models for Africa, built a stable and sustainable financing system and thus helped Africa realize independent development through “financial integration”.

Ever since its inception, the financial cooperation between China and Africa has been centering on such real economy sectors as infrastructure construction, unimpeded trade and manufacturing industry. Since its establishment, the China-Africa Development Fund has actively supported China-Africa economic and trade cooperation and invested in a number of projects in agriculture, infrastructure and resource development



(Photo/Xinhua)

Djibouti International Free Trade Zone.



An agronomy professor from China instructs Kenyan trainees on agricultural technology on September 18, 2023, in Matangitissa village, Nakuru County, Kenya.

among others. The Fund has effectively encouraged Chinese investment in Africa and played a critical role in infrastructure construction, technological progress, export and earning foreign exchange, as well as increasing employment in the host countries. As of October 2021, the 42 African entities from 19 African countries had indirectly participated in the Cross-border Interbank Payment System (CIPS). China has joined multilateral development and financial institutions such as the African Development Bank, the Eastern and Southern African Trade and Development Bank and the West African Development Bank. China has pledged a total of 996 million US dollars to the African Development Fund under the African Development Bank.

V. Hear-to-heart exchanges enable “people-to-people bond”

The amity between peoples holds the key to relationship between countries. China and Africa have witnessed ever deeper exchanges in such sectors as culture, media and technology and among think tanks, youth and women, which has further enhanced people-to-people bond and cemented the foundation for relations between China and Africa. Taking the academic and think tank cooperation between China and Africa as an example, China and Africa support various forms of cooperation among academic research institutions, think tanks and universities in carrying out research, academic exchanges and publication of works. Top priority is given to joint research and the sharing of achievements, especially on topics such as

governance, development paths, industrial capacity cooperation, culture and law. Both sides have also been working on enhancing research capacity. More than 80 think tanks and academic research institutions have participated in the China-Africa Joint Research and Exchange Plan. The Fifth Ministerial Conference of FOCAC held in 2012 proposed to implement the “China-Africa Think Tanks 10+10 Partnership Plan” for long-term paired cooperation. In April 2019, China-Africa Institute was established in Beijing.

PRIORITIES OF THE BRI DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

As the BRI international cooperation continues to deepen, institution-based cooperation has become an underlying trend and demand of the high-quality BRI development. In October 2023, President Xi Jinping stressed at the Third BRF that efforts should be made to strengthen institutional building for international BRI cooperation and that China would work with its BRI partner countries to strengthen the building of multilateral cooperation platforms covering energy, taxation, finance, green development, disaster reduction, anti-corruption, think tank, media, culture and other fields. Against this backdrop, institutional building should serve as a priority if China and Africa are to deepen the BRI cooperation.

Firstly, more efforts should be made to include African sub-regional organizations in the China-Africa partnership for the BRI development. In recent years, within the framework of the Agenda 2063 initiated by the AU, various African sub-regional organizations have served as concrete platforms for activities included in the Agenda, especially by tailoring the continental framework to sub-regional realities. African sub-regional organizations act not only as the foundation and pillars for the integration of the entire continent, but also directly influence the development strategies of the member countries. According to the latest assessment, African sub-regional organizations are playing a robust role in African integration and development and also serve as the most dynamic and effective basic unit for economic cooperation among neighboring countries in Africa.

Currently, the AU is the sole African inter-governmental organization that has signed the BRI cooperation agreement with China. Moreover, the existing mechanism of the FOCAC which is the main platform for China-Africa cooperation under the BRI, also decides that the FOCAC attaches more importance to sovereign countries

in Africa and the AU which serves as the representative of all African sovereign countries. This leads to an objective result that the African sub-regional organizations fail to attract due attention or even neglected. This is not conducive to the planning and implementation of synergizing development strategies between China and Africa within the BRI framework. China-Africa BRI cooperation has almost covered all countries across the continent. In the next step, China should seek to include major African sub-regional organizations in the framework and process of the BRI development and explore approaches and means for African sub-regional organizations to substantively engage in the FOCAC.

Secondly, efforts should be made to enhance the institutional connection between the FOCAC and the BRF. The institutionalization of the BRF is attracting attention, as it has been convened three times. The FOCAC has accumulated rich experience and gained obvious advantages in terms of institutionalization. On the one hand, the African members of the FOCAC account for one third of the BRI family, representing a critical basis and source of influence of the BRF. On the other hand, as the earliest platform for overall diplomacy established by China, the FOCAC can provide the BRF with reference for institutional building. Correspondingly, the BRF, once being institutionalized, will facilitate the connection between China-Africa BRI cooperation and global development agenda in terms of both values and practice and serve as a platform for the two mechanisms to expand third-party cooperation. In view of this, the FOCAC may make efforts in the following two aspects.

On the one hand, the FOCAC can seek synergy with the BRF in terms of meeting mechanism. The Advisory Council of the BRF has studied the international experience of hosting summits and accordingly put forward a series of suggestions on the institutional building of the BRF. For example, the BRF could be convened every two or three years with regular ministerial or interdepartmental meetings as sideline events. Such proposal is basically consistent with the FOCAC's conference mechanism and arrangement. As their complementary conference resources can be shared, the two forums embrace ripe conditions for cooperation. On the other hand, the FOCAC should enhance connection with the BRF in terms of supportive mechanisms. The FOCAC has not yet established a dedicated advisory and evaluation mechanism, leaving vacuum for the Western think tanks to pre-empt the right



to comment on China-Africa BRI cooperation with often biased reports. To alter such a situation, the FOCAC may leverage the influence and role of the Advisory Council of the BRF, by such means as recommending former African politicians with international influence to join the Advisory Council, encouraging the Council to include more content related to the China-Africa joint BRI development in their policy reports or pushing forward the publication of special reports on Africa. As for the BRF, it has not yet put in place a complete set of supporting mechanisms to follow up the implementation of the outcomes of the BRF, while the FOCAC has established a follow-up mechanism that can provide institutional support for the BRF. Besides, the FOCAC, with rich experience in practice, can facilitate other mechanisms in overall diplomacy to play their roles.

Thirdly, respecting Africa's dominant position, the FOCAC shall explore institutionalized cooperation with third parties in Africa. As the BRI continues to gain greater international influence, cooperation with third parties has



Photo/Xinhua

This is a parked Monnet Railway locomotive photographed on May 23, 2023 in Nairobi, Kenya.



Photo/Xinhua

On October 13, 2023, the final of the “Belt and Road: My China” Speech Competition was held in Nairobi, capital of Kenya. The picture is Konchilia Orville, from China Road and Bridge Corp, delivering a speech.

become a major trend. Recent years have witnessed extra-territorial powers beefing up efforts for institutionalized cooperation with Africa. In 2017, Japan and India jointly launched the “Asia Africa Growth Corridor” (AAGC). In 2021, the United States announced the Build Back Better World (B3W) within the framework of the G7, and the European Union launched the Global Gateway. For all these initiatives, Africa is the important goal. Although all these plans or initiatives intend to counter the influence of the BRI, competition also exists among themselves, which is clearly exhibited in the cooperation with Africa. As Africa enjoys higher strategic position and capability of independence while a multipolar pattern of major powers’ cooperation with Africa being formed, China and Africa embrace the potential and space for expanding cooperation with third parties. Therefore, within the FOCAC framework, China can explore institutionalized tripartite dialogues with the Western and emerging countries on such issues as rules and standards, push forward the formation of the new rules that are well recognized by Africa and consistent with Africa’s development conditions and enhance “soft connectivity”. Based on such development, further efforts should be made by China and Africa to explore institutionalized cooperation with third parties, especially the major countries.

CONCLUSION

China-Africa relations are the bedrock of the foundation of China’s diplomacy. Before the implementation of the BRI (in Africa), China had carried out pilot cooperation with Africa within the “461” cooperation framework and in terms of the construction of “highways, railways, aviation networks and industrialization”. With the convening of the FOCAC Johannesburg Summit as a turning point, China-Africa cooperation has been rapidly integrated into the BRI framework. Africa has transformed from a non-traditional region along the BRI to a key partner” and an important participant in the joint development of the BRI cooperation. The remarkable achievements made by China and Africa in jointly advancing the BRI are highlights of the BRI international cooperation, creating an African brand for the BRI development. In the future, China and Africa should further leverage on their advantages, follow the right direction, defuse risks and push forward to high-quality BRI development through intensified institutional building. 📌