

CHINA'S NEW LEADERSHIP AND SINO-AFRICA RELATIONS

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On November 15, 2012, the 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress announced the members of the new Politburo Standing Committee. Headed by Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, the fifth generation of Chinese leaders will decide the future of China and its relations with Africa and the world. The revelation of the long-speculated new leadership is yet to answer all the questions pertaining to China's domestic and foreign policies. On the domestic front, China watchers eagerly await to see how the new leaders will tackle much-needed and long-overdue economic restructuring and political reforms. In terms of foreign policy, the world is trying to understand and evaluate the new leaders' worldview, foreign policy posture and strategic thinking. For Africa, answers to these questions will determine how China's changing internal and external priorities and strategies affect its approach and interest toward the continent.

Common speculations about the new Chinese leaders' foreign policy are divided into two schools. The traditional

school believes that, given the collective nature of China's top decision-making process and the legacies of his predecessors, Xi will stay on the course designed by Deng Xiaoping and loyally executed by predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Characterized as "keeping a low profile," this course sees conciliation and avoiding confrontation as musts in optimizing the external environment conducive to China's economic growth. The more progressive school argues that China under Xi will become more assertive and hawkish, primarily because of the blossoming sense of empowerment from China's rapid rise. Meanwhile, as China's problems (economic slowdown and stagnation of political reform) intensify, the new leaders will need to exploit foreign threats to strengthen their legitimacy and divert the crisis at home.

Regardless of whether there will be a fundamental or philosophical change to China's foreign strategy, it is highly unlikely that China will pursue any major policy change toward Africa. Compared to the more urgent and

turbulent relations with big powers (such as the United States) and with its East Asian neighbors (due to territorial disputes), Sino-Africa relations have been significantly more manageable, smooth and satisfying for Beijing. China's current agenda on Africa will persist under Xi in the foreseeable future. Politically, China will continue to seek Africa's support of the One China Policy (Taiwan is part of China) and of its positions at multilateral forums such as the United Nations. Economically, Beijing will still look to Africa for natural resources and markets to fuel China's economic growth. Strategically, if U.S.-China competition continues to expand and intensify globally, China under Xi most likely will heighten its relations and cooperation with Africa, allocating more economic and political resources for the continent to foster pro-China policies in light of the U.S. competition.

Who are the Key Chinese Players in Sino-Africa Relations?

Xi has gathered considerable knowledge and experience on Africa throughout his grooming process. During his five years as the vice president, Xi met with numerous African leaders in Beijing, familiarizing himself with Africa's key concerns and building personal relationships. In November 2010, he undertook a seven-day trip to South Africa, Angola and Botswana, focusing on energy cooperation and infrastructure deals. Most recently, during the Fifth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Ministerial Conference in Beijing in July 2012, Xi participated substantially in the discussion on how to deepen Sino-African ties. Xi will be responsible for carrying out the \$20 billion in foreign aid committed at the conference in the next three years. Between 2012 and 2015, supporting the development of Africa's infrastructure, agriculture and manufacturing industry, as well as the region's small and mid-sized enterprises will be on the top of his Africa agenda.

At the time of this publication, the successors for the two most important positions in China's foreign policy apparatus, the state councilor on foreign policy and the minister of foreign affairs, are yet to be announced. However, at the working level, Vice Foreign Minister Zhai Jun will most likely stay on at his position and hold the Africa portfolio at the Chinese Foreign Ministry. A veteran Africa hand himself, Zhai will be assisted by the special envoy for African

affairs, Ambassador Zhong Jianhua. Zhong was the Chinese ambassador to South Africa from 2007 to 2012 and was appointed to the second most important Africa position at the Chinese Foreign Ministry earlier this year.

Since assuming the position, Ambassador Zhong has made public diplomacy his key priority and frequently participates in international conferences, symposiums and policy dialogues on Sino-Africa relations. In recent years, China's vast investment and infrastructure projects in Africa have helped to facilitate economic growth and improve local conditions in the region. However, the dark side of China's resources-centric investment strategy is as substantial as its positive outcomes, raising questions about the transparency, governance, accountability, and environmental and social impacts associated with China's economic activities in Africa. At the July 2012 FOCAC meeting, President Jacob Zuma of South Africa pointed out that trade between Africa and China is unbalanced and the pattern is problematic (Hook, 2012). These concerns voiced by Zuma have in some respects begun to erode the foundations of Sino-African relations with the potential of jeopardizing Beijing's Africa policy. Therefore, Ambassador Zhong's portfolio is necessitated by China's declining image and degrading relations with local African communities.

Africa's Expectations for China's New Leaders

From the African perspective, these concerns resonate across the continent. As the new Chinese leaders settle in, work should start on the implementation of the FOCAC Beijing Action Plan (2013-2015), which provides China a framework for working with African leaders. Currently, the action plan stands as rhetoric only, and it will be up to African leaders in 2013 to take action on issues such as increased voice in global governance, increased employment for African youth, heightened attention to labor standards and improved transparency of environmental contracts (FOCAC, 2012). African policymakers know that they are sitting on a demographic time bomb and therefore want their future engagement with China to translate into job opportunities for their growing young population. While a few African leaders (notably President Michael Sata of Zambia) have been vocal in their criticisms of Chinese labor standards on the continent, African civil society or-

ganizations have been more active on the environmental front. A typical example is Ikal Angelei, an African environmental activist, who has been pushing hard for improved environmental standards with China in Africa. Angelei has successfully blocked funding from the World Bank, the European Investment Bank and the African Development Bank for a Chinese hydroelectric project in Ethiopia (Gibe III) until environmental impact assessments are conducted (The Goldman Environmental Prize, 2012). In terms of global governance, Africa assisted China in regaining its seat in the United Nations in 1971 (Hook, 2012). This interaction points toward a long-standing relationship between Africa and China to enhance the voice of the Global South in institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and G-20.

Africa's priorities should not just be rhetoric. They represent the region's search for a long-term development model and its demand for China to contribute to rather than sabotage the process. Democratic governance and the rule of law have been the two cornerstones anchoring the recent socio-political stability and economic growth of African states. In the consolidation process, China's current economic model undercuts the attempt to build good governance practices and fundamentally risks reversing the gains achieved so far. Therefore, many Africans hope China's new leaders will shift China's priority from short-term resource exploitation to a more long-term sustainable development model. Specifically, Africans expect that technology transfer, institutional support toward strengthening local governance and the overall regula-

tory environment should become integral parts of China's "new" strategy in Africa.

Whether the new Chinese leaders will be able to meet the expectations of Africans remains to be seen. After all, China's new leaders have several pressing problems to address at home, and changing the country's current mercantilist policy in Africa might not be in its short-term interest. Furthermore, without political reform and better governance at home, it would be unrealistic to expect China to adopt such responsible approaches toward Africa. Nevertheless, with the new leadership in place, the hope is higher than ever for China to change and to improve, not only itself, but also its relations with Africa.

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