

EVOLVING SINO–AFRICAN RELATIONS PROSPECTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

By Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma

The author is chairperson of the African Union. This was her keynote address to the China–Africa Colloquium on 21 May 2015 at the University of Cape Town

It is an honour for me to address this esteemed colloquium on the evolution of China–Africa relations, its prospects and opportunities. This relationship has evolved over centuries, starting with trade between China and Africa on the Silk Road. Launching the South African parliament’s Millennium Project in 2000, the then-speaker Dr Frene Ginwala referred to “a rare map from the East – the *Da Ming Hun Yi Tu* – from the 13th century, which shows China and Asia’s awareness of Africa years before Western explorers thought they had discovered the southern part of our continent”.

This relationship also includes common experiences of colonialism and our participation at the historic Bandung Conference in 1955. The Asia–Africa Bandung Conference, among the first and largest of its kind, laid a new foundation for cooperation. During the subsequent decades, although itself a developing country, China sent medical workers, engineers and other professionals to newly independent African countries to help develop infrastructure and other basic services. This included the 1 860-kilometre Tanzania–Zambia railway, completed in 1975.¹ It also gave support to anti-colonial and national liberation movements still fighting for freedom. Independent African countries supported China’s readmission to the United Nations Security Council in 1971.



Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, chair of the African Union Commission, delivers the opening address at the two-day China-Africa Colloquium.

THE NEW ERA

Following the end of apartheid in Namibia and South Africa in the early 1990s, a process of redefining the relationship started, culminating in the decision to establish the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000. Economic relations between the continent and China grew, with rapid increases in trade and investments in areas such as infrastructure, agriculture, manufacturing, and, of course, culture and peace.

At the turn of the millennium, when FOCAC was launched, Africa was regarded at best as the 21st century’s development challenge and at worst as a hopeless continent. We chose to take a different view, and vowed to work to ensure that this century becomes the African century. Fifteen years later, the narrative about Africa has changed, because the continent is changing. These

developments prompted the decision by the African Union to develop a fifty-year vision, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, to decisively address the continent’s underdevelopment, poverty, insecurity and marginalisation.

Agenda 2063 is grounded in African experience and realities, while learning from other parts of the world – Asia and China in particular – that it is possible to effect transformation in one generation. We take heed of the Chinese example in reducing poverty from 53 percent to below 10 percent between 1981 and 2005. This is indeed a remarkable achievement.

The first draft of Agenda 2063 came from consultations with our people from all regions and sectors of the continent, instead of from governments or the AU Commission. Its most important priority is investment in people, including healthcare, water and sanitation, and >>

education – in particular, education in science, engineering, mathematics and technology. Africa’s population is the youngest of any continent, and this will remain so for the foreseeable future.

Agenda 2063 seeks to achieve an agricultural revolution by improving women’s and young people’s access to modern technology, to capital, land and irrigation, and their participation in agribusinesses. Flagship projects during the first ten-year plan of Agenda 2063 focus on replacing the handheld hoe with modern technology, and advocating for women’s rights to land and access to capital.

It prioritises Africa’s industrialisation through value addition and beneficiation of the natural resources that the continent currently exports as raw materials – exporting jobs and revenue in the process.

It realises that the integration of the continent is central to its development, and therefore recognises the need to address infrastructure backlogs, to connect Africa through transport (road, rail, aviation and marine) infrastructure, linking our economies, capital cities, tourism sites and commercial centres. Energy infrastructure is another critical factor, to ensure that we have a good mix of traditional fossil fuels and renewable energy such as wind, solar, hydro and geothermal. Infrastructure also means connecting us through broadband and other information and communication technologies.

Africa’s landmass is over 30 million square kilometres, and our oceanic space is three times that size – and yet we have not developed our “blue economy”. The import–export shipping sector is not African: this is another area where we give away revenue and jobs.

During 2015, the AU celebrates the Year of Women’s Empowerment, recognising the empowerment of women as a critical factor for inclusive social and economic development. The Africa we want will not be achieved unless women and youth are an integral part of the development and integration of the continent. Twenty years after the Beijing

Declaration on Women’s Rights, we are taking stock of how far we have progressed on women’s empowerment.

I was hoping that Vice-Chancellor Max Price would tell us how many black women we have as professors in faculty and management and research institutions, and the pipeline to increase these numbers.

In Africa, only 14 countries that have reached the 30 percent threshold of women members of parliament, but Rwanda leads the world with 63.8 percent.



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STRENGTHEN COOPERATION

Increasingly, we are engaging with our partners on the basis of these Agenda 2063 priorities. As we explore the evolution of the relationship between China and Africa and prepare for the 6th FOCAC in South Africa this year, this forms the basis of our efforts to strengthen cooperation.

We have cooperated with China on peace and security, and the importance of the nexus between peace and security. We are continuing to explore cooperation on such issues as skills development² and strengthening healthcare systems and the African Centre for Disease Control. China was among the first countries to rally to the assistance of the three countries affected by the Ebola epidemic. I want to thank African countries who sent experienced healthcare workers

and contributed to the AU Ebola efforts through ASEOWA [African Union Support to Ebola Outbreak in West Africa].

The memorandum of understanding signed by the AU and China in 2014 is an example of the direction we want to go, with its focus on cooperation in road, rail, aviation and industrialisation. We should use this to develop our local industries, such as steel and cement, and also to cooperate on the establishment of research and development centres.

At a political level, as Africa and other parts of the world continue to campaign for the reform of the global system of governance and for South–South cooperation, we also count on China’s support to correct the historical injustice of Africa being the only continent without a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Our cooperation, based on mutual benefits and respect, continues to evolve at bilateral and regional levels, and increasing at continental level. The People’s Republic of China recently opened a dedicated mission to the African Union. This is the second such mission to the AU, after the United States of America.

Our Agenda 2063 envisages a continent that is peaceful, prosperous, integrated and people-centred, and takes its rightful place in the world. Such an Africa is critical to a peaceful and prosperous world. As it develops and grows, the relationship between the continent and China must – and, we believe, will – contribute to the Africa we want. [NA](#)

NOTES

1. It is an interesting historical detail that, despite a favourable feasibility study on the project, Britain, Japan, West Germany, the World Bank, the United States, Russia and the United Nations all declined to fund the project. Only China stepped in.
2. Between 2000 and 2006, China trained 16 000 African professionals, and another 20 000 between 2010 and 2012. Former Premier Hu Jintao announced in 2014 a further 18 000 scholarships and training for 30 000 Africans in various sectors by 2015.