



SPECIAL ISSUE on the EU Africa Partnership Strategy

## Africa-China-EU Cooperation in Africa Prospects and Pitfalls

Africa-China-EU cooperation is still in its formative stages. It has the express focus of contributing to peace, stability and sustainable development in Africa. The creation of a virtuous circle of growth and development, one which employs the tools of globalisation to Africa's best advantage, has to be a fundamental aim of any trilateral cooperation. At the same time, the opening up of trilateral dialogue should allow all three partners to give consideration to areas in which conflicting views or interests arise. Indeed, the spectre of a two-way China-EU "donor cartel" emerging from the process continues to negatively influence perceptions of the initiative in some African circles. Thus, the challenge facing Africa, China and the EU is to envisage a mechanism or modality for managing trilateral cooperation in the era of globalisation that addresses the concerns of all participants while maintaining an overarching commitment to African development. This policy note examines the origins of the trilateral dialogue, makes proposals for building on this dialogue, and ends with possible models for this trilateral cooperation.

### Origins of Trilateral Dialogue

The Africa-China-EU cooperation initiative has been driven largely by the EU, especially the Commission, with the Chinese and Africans only gradually beginning to engage on the issue of trilateral cooperation. Though China's growing presence on the African continent was increasingly evident by 2000, Brussels and member states were slow to recognise the magnitude of the changes occurring in Africa. Even as late as 2005, the fact that China was only invited by the British to the G8 Gleneagles summit as an afterthought indicated the myopia within policy circles regarding the rapidly changing circumstances on the ground. Controversy over the Sudanese government's actions in Darfur brought China, the most important backer of and key trading partner with the regime, into sharp focus. The spectacle of a rising tide of criticism from EU member states damaging the otherwise warming ties between the EU and China pointed to the need for some form of dialogue on Africa, global governance and development issues. Integrating these concerns into the EU's broader aspirations for the relationship with China, the EU set about constructing a dialogue through a series of conferences, workshops and shared discussions on how the two might cooperate with Africa.

At the 2006 EU-China summit, the joint communiqué noted that:

[T]he Leaders agreed to pursue a structured dialogue on Africa and explore avenues for practical cooperation on the ground in partnership with the African side, including with the support of NEPAD initiatives and with the aim of attaining the Millennium Development Goals ... Both the EU and China are signatories of the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness. The two parties will continue to promote the effectiveness principles contained in the Paris Declaration.

This was again reiterated in the 2007 communiqué, in which the two sides agreed "to continue their dialogue on African issues, and actively explore effective ways and channels of cooperation among China, the EU and Africa in appropriate areas." All this was capped by the publication of a communication by the European Commission in October 2008, entitled *The EU, Africa and China: Towards Trilateral Dialogue and Cooperation*.

The communication proposed that the three parties work together in a "flexible and pragmatic way," linking their cooperation wherever possible with existing commitments in multilateral forums [p.5]. Proposals on sectoral cooperation were also made focusing on four key areas:

peace and security; support for African infrastructure; sustainable management of the environment and natural resources; and agriculture and food security.

Expectations in EU circles of the trilateral dialogue have been fairly high, linked as they are to an assessment of the possibilities of the EU's rise as a global actor and its predilection for the use of "soft power" in pursuing its foreign policy aims.<sup>1</sup> Others have claimed that the Chinese have become increasingly dismissive of the EU's purported foreign policy aspirations.<sup>2</sup> They argue that the EU's "unconditional engagement" with China, predicated on the assumption that through a widening web of formal agreements Beijing will ultimately adopt European values and practices, has not only failed to achieve these transformative aims but has brought few benefits to member states. Africa in particular is seen as an area where Chinese interests have systematically undermined EU positions in key economic and normative areas.<sup>3</sup>

As for China, it is not clear it shares the same level of enthusiasm for trilateral dialogue as advocates within the EU. Cautious involvement characterises the Chinese approach, which demonstrates willingness to assess the potential of such an arrangement – especially for enhancing development prospects in Africa – but at the same time recognising that aspects of the process may conflict with Chinese interests on the continent. Pang Zhongying has suggested that the Chinese government is troubled by the pressure to adopt what it sees as Western-dominated frameworks to which it was not party, such as the rules governing Official Development Assistance (ODA) at the OECD.<sup>4</sup> That said, Beijing has been willing to act as an observer in various institutions and processes ranging from the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI).<sup>5</sup>

Fundamentally, Chinese officials and academics voice concern that Africans view the trilateral dialogue as unnecessary or even suspicious. Chinese scholars believe that the origins of EU policy have less to do with interest in African development than with self-interest.

In fact, as the Chinese correctly assess, while representatives of member states and the AU Commission have participated in the trilateral dialogue process, as have African civil society actors, there remains profound scepticism within Africa. The ambivalence – bordering at times on hostility – of Africans towards trilateralism is in the first instance rooted in an assessment of the process as an effort by external powers to exercise a determining influence over the continent. Historical analogies with the Berlin conference of 1884-85, though misplaced, are nonetheless often cited by African participants at trilateral dialogue conferences. A

further worry among some Africans is that such a "donor cartel" would reduce the time-honoured practice of playing one foreigner off against another, something that the Angolan government, for instance, has demonstrated considerable skill in doing. Other Africans – especially those in civil society – are more sanguine about the process, seemingly sharing some of the European concerns about the impact of Chinese investment on governance, transparency and a host of environmental issues.

### Building Trilateral Cooperation

With these seemingly conflicting tendencies evident among the prospective partners in this trilateral arrangement, what are the drivers for cooperation? At bottom, there remains a recognition that African development must be the focus of any substantive collaborative activities. Indeed, given the aforementioned obstacles, any trilateral cooperation has to be shaped in line with prevailing African interests and carefully managed to ensure African "buy-in" and effective developmental outcomes. Fortunately, for most of the last ten years a number of African and international initiatives have arisen whose central aim has been to reassess the lessons of the past and, in light of those experiences, articulate a vision for African development. Chief among these is, of course, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad), which has charted an innovative path that brings foreign donors and investors together in support of African development priorities. All the leading industrialised states have endorsed Nepad, including the G8 countries and China.

At the same time, other international initiatives have been produced which complement the Nepad strategy. The UN's Millennium Summit in 2000 produced a framework aimed at mobilising donors and recipients to pursue policies focused on meeting a series of development targets, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).<sup>6</sup> The MDGs were confirmed again at the UN Conference on Financing Development in Monterrey in 2002, where leading OECD donors recommitted themselves to providing 0.7 per cent of their GDP for ODA, while aid recipients recommitted themselves to embracing the twin goals of adopting good governance practices and market-friendly macroeconomic policies.<sup>7</sup> Finally, currently efforts are being made to integrate emerging challenges such as climate change into these existing frameworks. Thus, for policymakers in Africa, China and the EU this means recognising the synergies between their interests and the established programmes for African development structured to address the longstanding problems of poverty, conflict and sustainable growth in Africa.

There are some fundamental challenges to realising trilateral cooperation. First and foremost, there are the undeniable differences in composition and character among the EU, China and Africa. These differences represent potential obstacles to cooperation – not insurmountable but evident – that need to be recognised and accounted for in structuring

1. Wissenbach, U. (2009), 'The EU's Response to China's Africa Safari: Can Triangular Cooperation Match Needs?', *European Journal of Development Research*, 21:4, p. 670.

2. Fox, J. and F. Godement (2009), *A Power Audit of EU-China Relations*. Policy Report, European Council on Foreign Relations, April, p. 2.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

4. Pang, Z. (2007), *New Powers for Global Change: Some Approaches to Boost China's Pivotal Role in Tackling Global Challenges*. FES Briefing Paper, June, p. 7.

5. The EITI does not provide for countries to have formal observer status, but China is nevertheless following its progress.

6. Millennium Development Goals are outlined in [www.un.org/millenniumgoals](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals).

7. Fomerand, J. (2005), 'North-South Issues', in Muldoon, J. et al. (eds), *Multilateral Diplomacy and the United Nations Today*. Boulder CO: Westview, p. 265.

any cooperation between the three.

For instance, with few exceptions, the countries of the EU are widely seen to be post-industrial economies whose transition from manufacturing to services occurred decades ago. The development of the welfare state as a central tenet of European social democracy, predicated on a political consensus between government, business and labour, forms the backbone of state-societal relations. Concurrently, the thrust of the “European project” launched in 1957 has been to transcend core features of the nation state, in particular the virulent nationalism that propelled Europe into two world wars, and to build a new political structure. This experience has instilled in the EU a commitment to provisions for the protection of human and social rights, a situation most marked in its foreign, development and enlargement policies.

In China’s case, the drive for modernity is central to the transformation pursued by the Chinese Communist Party since the onset of liberation in 1949. China remains committed to classic definitions of sovereignty as a source of international stability and order, reflected in its five principles of foreign policy. Linked to this are the continuing challenges of domestic development, which cause China’s leadership to emphasise achievements in the arena of economic rights over those in the political realm. China is thus as an emerging power on course towards fulfilling long-held expectations to become a key global actor.

Africa is, of course, a disparate set of states with different levels of development, resource and other factor endowments, as well as widely divergent forms of governance. On the last point, comparison with the EU, which is characterised by a singular commitment to democracy among its membership, is instructive. In the case of Africa, the primary institution representing all the continent’s states is the African Union (AU) and its constitution articulates a commitment to basic economic and human rights. The sovereignty principle remains a bulwark for Africa’s generally weak states, but the AU allows for exceptions to this principle, notably in cases of genocide. Development (as with China) is the *sine qua non* of African interests, though too often this aim has been thwarted by combinations of poor leadership, domestic turmoil and negative external influences.

Beyond these structural concerns, there are significant impediments to cooperation in the policy sphere. These include, at a very fundamental level, differing definitions of what constitutes development (the preferred European term) and cooperation (the preferred Chinese term). For Europe, there is increasing acknowledgement that foreign aid should reflect Africa’s definition of its needs rather than – as has been the case in the traditional donor-recipient relationship – either an external assessment of African needs and/or the pursuit of Europe’s commercial and political aims through foreign aid. There is a growing trend towards direct budget support rather than project-based assistance. For the Chinese, cooperation has been framed in terms of mutual benefit, which presumes a larger measure of political equality than envisaged in the donor-recipient relationship. Moreover, the open acknowledgement of mutual benefit allows all parties to integrate their interests into any cooperation programme as well as to embrace modalities of as-

sistance that go beyond grants and loans to include foreign direct investment.

Informing these differences are not only the respective historical disparities underlying the parties’ global economic standing (e.g., European states as former colonial powers and China as a victim of colonialism), but also the fact that China’s and the EU’s foreign assistance programming is responding to differing domestic constituencies. In the EU, member states as well as all-European institutions influence the shape, direction and content of development assistance programming. For China, whose cooperation programme melds political purpose with commercial interests, the bureaucratic inputs are perhaps the strongest determinants in these respects. In both instances, the EU and China tailor their development/cooperation to their rising interest in African resources. Finally, it is worth noting that AU (and Nepal) statements on development issues reflect the European understanding of development – though they are both critical of aspects of the European approach and more expansive in their reach. At the same time, participation by African states in various South forums has affirmed cooperation and mutual benefit as preferred forms of engagement.

Finally, one should consider existing forms of interaction between two of the three partners, notably the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the EU-Africa Summit process and the EU-China strategic partnership. However, given the historical relationship between Europe and Africa, it would be wrong to see these bi-regional cooperative arrangements as equivalent in depth. The existence of numerous longstanding, functional forms of cooperation between European and African countries should be noted, especially the institutionalised donor-recipient ties such as the Lome and later Cotonou agreements. There are also structurally significant forms of bilateral cooperation in place, such as the longstanding arrangement linking some West African currencies to the French currency as well as a host of bilateral defence agreements between ex-colonial powers and African countries.

### Recommendations: Possible Models for Trilateral Cooperation

In light of these structural factors and policy differences, what would be the best path towards realising the general aims of trilateral cooperation and what form should trilateral cooperation take?

#### A. OECD-DAC Ascension Model of Cooperation

One approach could be to adopt the prevailing set of rules, practices and norms already established through the OECD’s DAC to guide the donor-recipient relationship. The argument in favour of this approach is that it reflects “best practice” as understood by many Western development practitioners after decades of review and refinement. Under this scenario, China would be asked to adapt its programmes to the OECD’s prevailing norms and procedures. For the EU, this is probably the most desirable, not the least because it reflects previously negotiated positions and would not require reopening the issues.



The problem with this approach is the underlying power asymmetries between Europe and Africa reaching back to the colonial period that serve as the foundation for much of the arrangement. Moreover, it is precisely these dimensions that contribute to China's concerns regarding the OECD/DAC along with the apparent unwillingness to meet the Chinese requirement regarding weighted voting within the institution. Indeed, the Chinese government has indicated that it is highly unlikely to subscribe to this approach.<sup>8</sup>

### *B. Forging Africa-China-EU Cooperation on an ad hoc Basis*

Another approach would be to use the Chinese experience of development, especially with reference to Africa, to craft a new Africa-China-EU set of arrangements. The advantages of this undertaking would be that it recognises the prevailing cooperative approaches utilised by China in its Africa policy. Moreover, these activities were formulated within a solidarity framework with which Beijing and Africa are already familiar. Moreover, given that aspects of the Chinese assistance programme are in some flux, this approach would reflect this changing reality as well. Instances of this sort of cooperation, which overlaps with established EU and African positions,<sup>9</sup> is the agreement on non-binding frameworks such as the Equator Principles for the financial sector adopted by the China Ex-Im Bank, and China's willingness to abide by EITI in those African countries formally subscribing to it. For China, this approach is probably the most desirable as it allows Beijing to negotiate around a selective set of arrangements that conform to its interests and institutions, even if these are undergoing some change. The most obvious case of the latter is the ongoing debate within Chinese policy circles as to whether to establish a single agency to manage development cooperation.

The problem with this approach is that selective opting in and out is likely to make the EU and Africa unhappy with adapting to it – and also opens up the possibility of backsliding on hard-won negotiated agreements. Moreover, it is unclear whether this ad hoc approach would create more opportunities for poor practices to “creep” in and thus produce an outcome with which all parties are ultimately dissatisfied.

### *C. EU and China Adaptation to an Africa Model of Cooperation*

The emphasis here would be on using as a guide existing African positions drawn from the AU as a collective expression of African views. Among the treaties that could be adapted to trilateral cooperation are: the Convention on Human and Peoples Rights (1981), ratified by all 53 African states; the African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (2003), signed by 34 states and ratified by seven; and the establishment of the AU's Peace and Security Council (2002), signed on to by 50 states, with 43 having ratified the authorising protocol. It should be noted that the Peace and Security Council includes the memora-

ble article claiming the “right of the Union to intervene in respect to grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity” and was the basis for AU's authorisation for a peacekeeping mission in Darfur in 2004. It is clear that for African states, securing some form of Chinese and EU acceptance of these treaties would be the most desirable outcome. Getting the other two partners to accept African formulations on central questions about the exploitation of natural resources would be the most empowering and appropriate outcome, especially given that the terrain of action is Africa.

However, one problem with this approach for the Europeans and Chinese is that there is uneven African adherence to treaties, reflected in their partial ratification and/or implementation. This may be due to the fact that the AU is still too new to fully enforce its own treaties, while, concurrently, African states are unwilling to surrender sovereignty on these matters, despite treaty commitments. Perhaps more to the point, much like the previous approaches, there is no indication that either China or the EU would agree to or accept all aspects of the African model as the source of a trilateral cooperative framework.

### **The Way Forward**

In light of the foregoing review, the possibility for action may seem limited. However, there is already much greater conformity of ideas and acceptance of common standards among Africa-China-EU if one views the range of trilateral concerns through the UN lens. The UN provides common ground through its many seminal declarations and treaties, most of which the three partners have already signed. For instance, the “Right to Development” passed by the General Assembly in 1986 and reaffirmed at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, provides a series of positions on a broad range of human rights, including “first generation” (civil and political) and “second generation” (economic, social and cultural) rights (GA Resolution 41/128 1986). The MDGs are a set of concrete objectives in key areas of development, such as halving poverty rates, improving education and healthcare and the status of women and provisions for increasing development assistance. And finally, there is the UN Global Compact, which focuses on ten principles that signatory corporations are committed to abide by, including human rights, labour standards and environmental and anti-corruption measures. Notably, 11 Chinese business associations are signatories to the Global Compact, as are African and EU equivalents.<sup>10</sup>

This non-exhaustive list could clearly serve as a foundation for building cooperation. In moving forward, it is suggested that the trilateral partners consider the following dimensions for action. They are, it should be said, deliberately not meant to be sequential but are, rather, complementary.

#### *First dimension – shaping cooperation*

The trilateral partners need to decide on a common definition of the “issue” – development cooperation in Africa – and the parameters for such interaction. In this regard, it

8. Ambassador Liu Guijin, opening remarks, ‘Cooperation with Africa in the Context of Globalisation: Views from African, Chinese and European Perspectives’, 28 April 2008, Beijing.

9. For instance, there are 15 African government signatories of or applicants to EITI.

10. See [unglobalcompact.org](http://unglobalcompact.org)

will be necessary to settle on a vocabulary and grammar of cooperation. In the first instance, vexing issues such as what constitutes “development” and “cooperation” need to be defined and formulated in a way that is acceptable to all parties. Here again, existing agreements at the UN level should be a helpful starting point. It would be useful in this context to identify areas where prevailing treaties, conventions and agreements – such as those listed above – have already been signed and out of which a meaningful framework agreement can be forged into a proto-framework agreement on Africa-China-EU cooperation.

#### *Second dimension – identify cooperative projects*

The use of a functionalist approach to address non-controversial sectors where the partners can engage in cooperative projects would seem to be a sensible avenue for initial forms of practical cooperation in Africa. To be sustainable, such cooperation must reflect a number of things. First, it should focus on Africa’s description of its needs, for instance infrastructure, power requirements, education, etc. as outlined in seminal documents like the Nepad priorities. Second, it would have to be in a non-contentious area for China or the EU. Once identified, the cooperative venture should be structured in such a way as to reflect the Chinese experience of pursuing “mutual benefit” in its aid programming, coupled with the emphasis on project-based assistance, and married to the EU’s emphasis on budget support and capacity building.

#### *Third dimension – recognising that trilateralism already exists in practice*

As noted above, the basis for trilateral cooperation already exists in the form of the shared values mediated through the UN. It is also important to recognise that in a very practical way trilateralism is already ongoing in different sectors and areas. Examples of this include cooperation among European, African and Chinese firms and institutions, ranging from joint initiatives in infrastructure projects, to security sector cooperation in the form of dialogue and mutual support for some UN and AU peacekeeping initiatives, to the area of financial institutions in which joint project funding for infrastructure is accepted practice. In this regard, it would be useful to conduct a comprehensive *review of what is being done, publicise these activities and assess the degree to which these endeavours comply with* any preliminary

Africa-China-EU framework agreement. The latter point is particularly important, as it would seem naïve to devise a framework that is not flexible enough to allow for inclusion of the majority of ongoing forms of cooperation.

#### **Trilateralism and the Challenges to Cooperation**

Trilateral Africa-China-EU cooperation presents a unique opportunity to be a catalyst for African development, while not ignoring the interests of each of the parties. The promise of Africa-China-EU trilateral cooperation is real. Nonetheless, there are serious issues to be addressed if this promise is to become a reality. For example, the partners will have to determine how to measure the success and sustainability of a cooperative project or activity. With each party having – at least for now – a seemingly different timeline for evaluating the success or failure of any joint endeavour in development cooperation in Africa, the possibility of cooperative projects descending into mutual consternation and even recrimination is self-evident. Furthermore, if the three partners continue down this path of devising their own framework for cooperation, they will have to create an agreed mechanism for assessing compliance with the terms of the framework.

At the same, the current focus on coordinating approaches to aid policy – albeit selectively – does not do justice to the possibilities encapsulated in South-South cooperation. The pursuit of commercial aims modelled on the Aristotelian adage of “doing well while doing good”, allows for a broader scope of activities in the name of development aims. In this regard, trilateral cooperation should not be viewed through a narrow interpretation of development, i.e., aid, without focusing equally on the benefits to development that might accrue from other forms of cooperation, even where the primary objective may be commercial as opposed to fighting poverty.

Finally, perhaps the most important and contentious matter facing trilateralism is the dilemma of ownership and perception. If the initiative is not ultimately driven by Africa, trilateralism could be seen – despite best intentions – as China-EU collusion over Africa. The critical voices in Europe, which see Chinese gains in Africa without concomitant reciprocity, have their echo in policymaking circles in China. Most significantly, there is still no strong advocate of this process among African states, regional organisations or continental bodies. More than any other element, it is this last that could sour the prospective partnership.

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