
Joint Briefing



The Fifth FOCAC: What Role for Peace and Security?

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In July 2012, the 5th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Ministerial Conference will be held in Beijing. These high-level meetings, which occur every three years, facilitate cooperation in the fields of trade, investment, development, health, education, environment, people-to-people exchanges and various other issues. One important issue is peace and security. Addressing the last FOCAC meeting in 2009, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao made clear that “China is willing to increase involvement in the settlement of issues concerning peace and security in Africa.”ⁱ

Africa has become, on the whole, a more peaceful continent in the past two decades.ⁱⁱ However, as on-going crises in Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and elsewhere demonstrate, insecurity continues to act as obstacles to socio-economic development. The World Bank considers 17 countries in Africa to be fragile situations. It also estimates that ‘civil conflict costs the average developing country roughly 30 years of GDP growth, and countries in protracted crisis can fall over 20 percentage points behind in overcoming poverty.’ It also notes that no low-income fragile or conflict-affected country has yet to achieve a single Millennium Development Goal.ⁱⁱⁱ Individuals, families and communities in these countries suffer twice: first from the direct impact of violence; second from the longer-term obstacles that prevent them from meeting their economic aspirations.

Outside actors cannot solve these problems alone. As the 2009 FOCAC Action Plan states, the ‘Chinese Government appreciates the concept and practice of “Solving African Problems by Africans.”’ However, it is equally clear that in today’s globalised world insecurity is not only the problem

of Africans. Nor are the solutions. Outside actors can have a positive impact on peace and security, both directly and indirectly. China – which has so dramatically deepened its relationship with Africa – is one such actor.

For these reasons it is to be welcomed that matters of peace and security will receive significant attention in the upcoming FOCAC in Beijing. There are of course many issues that should be on the agenda, including China’s position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the role of the African Union (AU) and sub-regional organisations, peacekeeping, piracy, terrorism and various non-traditional security threats. However, three issues deserve special attention at the 5th FOCAC.

Firstly, discussion on what political and diplomatic measures China can take to de-escalate crises and prevent conflict is required. African and international coverage of the on-going dispute between Sudan and South Sudan has shown that many believe China not only has great influence over the conflicting parties, but that it could actively use this to promote peace. Through sending Special Envoys and playing an active role in the UNSC, the Chinese Government has started to meet these expectations. On the whole, such high-profile and visible diplomatic actions by China have not been seen in the past or elsewhere on the continent. July presents an opportunity for exploring how in the future China can lend the weight of its influence in support of the AU and other African actors who are trying to deal with crises but often lack the necessary leverage over conflict parties. Furthermore, agreement on longer-term conflict prevention strategies could lead to benefits that far supersede those of short-term, reactionary and ad-hoc responses.

Secondly, one crucial security issue in Africa is the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW). It must be discussed at the next FOCAC. There are millions of illegal SALW in circulation in Africa and an unlimited capacity by rebel groups, terrorists, pirates and other criminals to obtain such weapons, both old and new. African states have made efforts to address the problems of SALW proliferation, establishing national strategies while at the same time agreeing to various regional initiatives. However, Africa's governments and regional bodies require significant international support to implement their commitments. Given that over 95% of SALW originate from outside of the continent, the international community has a responsibility to provide this support. As a major supplier of SALW, China has in fact already made concrete commitments to fulfil these responsibilities. At the first three FOCAC meetings in 2000, 2003 and 2006, explicit commitments were made to enhance cooperation. For example, the Beijing Action Plan of the 2006 FOCAC stated that China would support "the effort to combat illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. It will provide financial and material assistance and related training for African countries within its capacity." However, progress has been limited and at the 4th FOCAC meeting in 2009, no references were made to SALW at all.

The 5th FOCAC meeting presents an opportunity to address this regression. There should be an explicit and tangible commitment from China to provide support to African-led efforts to tackle the problems associated with SALW. For example, as it has already done for Latin America, China could commit financial and technical assistance for the implementation of regional, sub-regional and national initiatives that are hamstrung by a lack of resources. Furthermore, the meeting provides an opportunity for frank discussion on what constitutes a responsible arms transfer. Criticism of China's arms exports are often exaggerated because they present only half the story and unfair because they point the finger only at China. However, just because claims are exaggerated does not mean there is no truth to them: Chinese-made weapons have too often fallen into the wrong hands and been used for the wrong reasons. And even though China is by no means the world's largest arms supplier, it too must contribute to international efforts to make the global arms trade more responsible.

A final aspect that merits serious attention is the great potential China can play in post-conflict reconstruction. China's financial assistance for development projects, especially in the area of infrastructure, can have an extremely positive impact in countries emerging from war, where schools, universities, hospital, roads, railway lines, and power facilities all need to be re-built or, as is

often the case, built for the first time. China's win-win approach to economic development has been welcomed across the continent and provided benefits, such as jobs and services, which may be more sustainable and transformative than Western aid. Furthermore, Chinese infrastructure is cheap, quick to be delivered and comes as a fully completed turn-key product - not a large sum of money at risk of slipping into pockets rather than projects. While Western donors shied away from funding infrastructure development in post-conflict Angola, oil-for-infrastructure deals with China, amounting to \$7.5 billion between 2004 -11, contributed to the reconstruction of the country. In South Sudan, which has immense infrastructure demands, Chinese finance and companies are set to play a large role. Economic growth after conflict can help address the root causes of instability and in this regard China can support peacebuilding efforts. Given that half of all civil wars are actually post-conflict relapses, this should also be seen as a way to help prevent future conflicts.

However, assistance for economic development does not build peace on its own. In fact, in some cases, it can fuel conflict and resentment when it is seen to favour one group at the cost of another. China's role in pre-secession Sudan holds important lessons in this regard. Perceptions of where, and to whom, the benefits of economic assistance are distributed often matters more for stability than whether it is delivered at all. These challenges are not unique to China. All actors playing a role in development face them. In order to help minimise these risks, the 5th FOCAC meeting could highlight the need for conflict sensitivity. A three-step approach is required to be conflict-sensitive: Firstly, providers of development assistance must work together to better understand the conflict context in which they operate. Systematically consulting with all the stakeholders – including governments, civil society groups and local communities – will be crucial. Secondly, they must clearly identify how their assistance risks impacting on conflict dynamics. Thirdly, they must act on this analysis to minimise negative impacts and promote positive ones. In short, China's economic assistance can no longer be isolated from the context in which it is delivered.

China is not the answer to Africa's security challenges, nor its wider development aspirations. Instead, solutions lie in the hands of African governments, political leaders and civil society. What matters is how China chooses to involve itself in these efforts. Starting to improve crisis response and conflict prevention, paying greater attention to the problem of SALW and providing more thoughtful development assistance to countries emerging from conflict would be strong foundations to build upon. The 5th FOCAC presents an opportunity to start laying them.

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ⁱ Speech delivered by Premier Wen Jiabao, Opening Ceremony of the Fourth Ministerial Conference on China-Africa Cooperation, 8 November 2009

ⁱⁱ *Africa Progress Report 2012*, p 64-66

ⁱⁱⁱ World Bank (2011) *World Bank Development Report 2011*