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STELLENBOSCH · SOUTH AFRICA

## CCS COMMENTARY:

### FOCAC VI and the future of infrastructure in Africa

In preparation for the Forum of China Africa Co-operation (FOCAC) VI summit, to be held on 4 and 5 December 2015 in South Africa, numerous institutes have organised conferences and seminars in which academics, policy-makers, government representatives and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were and still are discussing and analysing what FOCAC VI needs to priorities and how to go about it. Seeing as infrastructure and industrialisation were given priority in the Sino-African relationship, it comes as no surprise that these preparatory workshops and conferences are addressing those issues and outlining the crucial aspects thereof. This commentary will focus on two such events: the *One belt One Road and a Prosperous Africa Conference* held in Durban between 19 and 20 November and the *China-Africa Co-operation on Three Networks of Africa's Infrastructure and Industrialisation Seminar* held in Nairobi, Kenya in late October, discussing the main outcomes of the conferences and what the future holds for China-Africa co-operation in the infrastructure sector as envisaged by the delegates from both China and Africa.

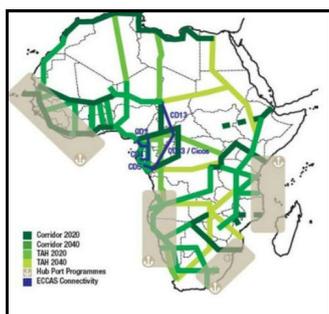


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#### The current state of affairs

Africa's infrastructure, although improving, is a perpetual problem. Lack of maintenance, lack of funding and conflicts that persists and transcend national boundaries all contribute to the current state of affairs. When flying over Sub-Saharan Africa, one needs to only look through the airplane windows to realise that vast areas of the continent are still only covered with dirt roads or no roads, and even less railways or airports. This started changing with the incursion of Chinese companies in the African infrastructure market in the early 2000s. What we can now see are numerous roads, railways, airports and ports being constructed by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private companies who do this for two reasons: diversification from the saturated Chinese construction market, as well as seeking market shares in the continent that is considered the last frontier of untapped opportunities. Projects such as the Lamu Port, South Sudan-Ethiopia transport corridor (LAPSSET) and the standard gauge railway currently under construction between Nairobi and Mombasa, as well as the Tanzania transport corridor connecting Dar es Salaam with future satellite city of Bagamoyo and inland Tanzania, all serve one purpose: to connect African states and contribute to increased mobility of goods and people. What these projects have in common is the Chinese factor, given that Chinese companies are entrusted with either full or partial construction of the envisaged rails and roads. Despite issues of environmental concern and labour, Chinese companies are welcomed in the African infrastructure sector, based on their proclivity for delivering on what was promised.

China's co-operation with Africa, through platforms such as FOCAC and BRICS, has in recent years made infrastructure one of the main points on the agenda for a more prosperous Africa. In light of the upcoming FOCAC VI, numerous think tanks, government representatives and academics have held seminars and conferences delineating what is needed for future infrastructure development in Africa and how China can feature in this endeavour, as well as what should be discussed at the upcoming summit. One thing that stood out during the two conferences on infrastructure development and industrialisation in Africa is the One Belt One Road project, aimed at connecting China with an overland road network to Europe, and a maritime route

via the South China sea, across the Indian ocean through the Red sea up to Venice; and the projects currently in progress in Eastern and Southern Africa that have great potential to link with the maritime route that would connect to Mombasa. These projects not only have the capacity to contribute to better intra-regional trade in Africa (which currently stands at only 14 per cent compared to Europe's 66 per cent and Asia's 53 per cent) but to also bring about better people-to-people relations between the African states as well as China. However, a few aspects that need to be considered that came up during the two conferences are the need for interlinking hard and soft infrastructure, because the one without the other cannot contribute to sustainable development. While Africa has great human capital potential, the need arises for the construction of soft infrastructure such as schools, vocational training colleges, technical colleges and the like where the future generations will be trained to maintain the infrastructure currently being built by Chinese as well as other foreign and domestic companies. In addition, while Africa has vast reserves of natural resources, they are not utilised to the best of their capacity as there is limited to no value added production on the continent. In order for Africa to be able to sustain itself, beneficiation of mineral products is a prerequisite. Thus, the upcoming FOCAC VI summit should not only focus on the development of roads and railways across Africa, but also on the development of local processing plants as well as the above-mentioned soft infrastructure. Without investment in human capital development, the infrastructure will be a short-term profit.

### **China's future role in Africa's infrastructure development**

While some of the attendees at the two aforementioned conferences were highly sceptical over China's aims and motives for this One Belt One Road (and general engagement of Chinese companies in Africa), arguing that it is unclear how this can benefit Africa in the long run, particularly because that specific project will (for the time being) only connect to Mombasa, Kenya; the Chinese delegates attending, were perfectly clear about how it can benefit Africa. Ultimately, it is up to Africa to decide how it wants this project to benefit it. The Chinese delegations used the often heard "win-win" and "mutual benefit" rhetoric to explain China's motives within China-Africa relations; however, the general line of thought amongst all delegates at both conferences was that Africa needs to find and stand by its own motives. The two conferences were, as a result, not so much about infrastructure development in Africa and China's role in it, but about the need for Africa to wake up and claim its rightful place at the negotiation table provided through the FOCAC platform. This, as was highlighted by both the Chinese delegations and the African scholars, can only be done through reclaiming of African agency. African infrastructure needs, as well as all other socio-economic needs can only be highlighted by Africans, and China will be there to offer support. Therefore, high hopes are placed on the upcoming FOCAC VI to provide a platform where the question will shift from: "what can China do for Africa?" to "what can Africa do for Africa?"

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