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China's African Union Diplomacy:  
*Challenges and Prospects for the Future.*

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## **INTRODUCTION.**

The relationship between the African Union (AU) and China has arguably become closer in the last few years. In 2015, the People's Republic of China (PRC) established a diplomatic mission to the organisation, the third after the US and the EU, as part of its effort to move beyond bilateral mechanisms, which have traditionally been the preferred channel for Sino-African relations. So far, China has mostly worked with the AU Peace and Security Council on maintaining peace and security on the continent. However, in dealing with the AU, Beijing has encountered a series of challenges which are partly inherent in the organisation itself, and partly arise from the peculiarities of Chinese diplomacy, which relies heavily on government-to-government ties.

## **THE AFRICAN UNION: AN OVERVIEW.**

In the post-Cold War era, when Western powers shifted their attention from Africa to Eastern Europe and Asia, the UN, overburdened by requests to intervene in continental conflicts, started calling for increased regional engagement. The Organization of African Unity (OAU), which had been expected to respond to these needs, was not able to provide strong leadership nor take any significant action to address any of these conflicts, mostly due to institutional and structural weaknesses. When the OAU was succeeded by the AU in 2002, its principal aim was to perform the tasks that the OAU had not been able to handle. Its Constitutive Act supported maintenance of the status quo by upholding the principles of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of its member states, although it presents more elaborate features than the OAU Charter. Such features include: the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the standing organ for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts; the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), in charge of providing the Chairperson of the Commission with relevant information on potential conflicts and threats to peace; the African Standby Force (ASF), which operates at the continental, sub-regional, and state level through five regional brigades of around 4,300 troops; and the Panel of the Wise (PoW), which is composed of five members, representing Africa's five sub-regions (North Africa; East Africa; Southern Africa; Central Africa; and West Africa) and is in charge of preventive diplomacy and peace making. Furthermore, eight regional economic communities (RECs) were established with the Abuja treaty in 1991 and constitute not only key building blocks for economic integration in the continent, but also essential actors in maintaining peace and stability in their respective regions. While these are all important steps in the AU's efforts to maintain peace on the continent, and while the PSC's determination to forestall frequent unilateral intervention from foreign actors is laudable, the reality of post-colonial conflicts in Africa means a lot more work needs to be done. To date, the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) still faces a series of political and technical challenges, and the AU struggles to build effective conflict-resolution and post-conflict reconstruction mechanisms. Sovereignty still represents a central and very contested element in African security, and it is often instrumentalised by governments that fail to provide security, welfare, and development for their peoples.

## WHAT ROLE FOR CHINA?

Built in 2012 at a cost of US\$200 million, the new AU headquarters are a symbol of China-Africa ties. A recent report by *Le Monde* accused the PRC of data theft, and although the accusations have been fiercely denied by both Chinese and African officials, the incident prompts a reflection on the role China has been playing in the continent's peace and security. The construction of the AU building is only one of the many contributions China has made to the AU in the last few years. During the latest Forum on China-Africa Cooperation held in 2015, President Xi Jinping committed US\$60 million in free aid to the AU to support the building of the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis. In 2016, China donated US\$1.2 million towards peace efforts in Somalia through the AU peacekeeping operation (AMISOM). Furthermore, the establishment of a dedicated PRC diplomatic mission in Addis Ababa in 2015 reflects an awareness of the need for a permanent link to the organisation. During the 7th China-AU strategic dialogue held in Beijing in February 2018, an invitation to establish an AU representative office in China was renewed.

Yet, cooperation between the AU and China is complicated by a number of issues, some of which are inherent in the AU, while some are due to China's diplomatic tradition in Africa. As for those inherent in the AU, firstly, many AU member states do not usually pay their annual dues, so that most of the AU's funding still comes from external donors, including the EU and the UN. According to its latest financial statement, 61.7% of the financing came from outside of the continent in 2015. This makes the body dependent on external partners, a fact which has limited its effectiveness in decision-making, as well as brought the autonomy of its agenda into question. Secondly, in 2015 it was decided that six countries—South Africa, Nigeria, Algeria, Angola, Egypt, and Libya—should increase their financial contributions because their economic situations were healthier than most African counterparts. These six countries alone had been expected to cover 60% of the entire AU budget starting from last year. This, in turn, raised doubts that the AU's priorities might be decided by this small faction of countries pursuing their own national interests. Indeed, so far, the AU seems to have failed to promote unity and solidarity among African states. Thirdly, while it is the responsibility of the RECs and individual countries to implement protocols and integrate policies, the AU Commission is still charged with monitoring that process. But the process remains slow despite the numerous efforts and working committees formed by the AU to coordinate the RECs.

There are also problems in the China-Africa relationship itself complicating Beijing's AU diplomacy. Firstly, despite its long involvement in the continent, with Chinese contacts going back to explorer Zheng He's expeditions to the eastern coast of Africa from 1405 to 1433, it is only in the last 20 years that China has significantly expanded its presence. For this reason, it may be considered a newcomer to the dynamics of the continent and to the roots of conflict, as well as to peacekeeping and peacebuilding practices. Its limited knowledge on certain topics has at times constrained the effectiveness of its policies and led some to question its role as a responsible partner. Secondly, despite China's claims of a leading role for itself, its staunch adherence to the norms of respect for state sovereignty and non-interference in others' internal affairs have proved limiting. While adjustments to such principles have undoubtedly been witnessed, for instance in Beijing's involvement in the peace process between Sudan and South Sudan, its reluctance to take positions on sensitive, often politicised issues threatens its readiness to fully engage with the complex issues the continent faces. Indeed, China's mediation efforts, particularly in Sudan, have often been criticised as mostly driven by a desire to protect its economic interests. Finally, what Beijing expects from its efforts to cooperate with the AU seems to be a unitary, pan-African voice, which, as noted above, has been difficult to achieve. This contradicts and may even endanger China's aspiration to transcend bilateral mechanisms and deepen multilateral cooperation. What often happens is that China ends up falling back on its tradition of using its strong ties with governing elites to strike deals more quickly and efficiently. While this may be inevitable, given that Africa is a continent of over 50 states, many have questioned whether China even has a broad and comprehensive Africa strategy.

## **THE WAY FORWARD.**

The challenges of turning the China-AU relation into a successful one might be addressed in several ways. First, while Chinese efforts at mediation and its preference for high-level diplomatic exchanges may represent a good alternative to any active 'interventionist' attitude, such efforts need to be better integrated at both the multilateral and bilateral level. At the moment, the China-Africa partnership is essentially based on meetings and policies discussed at the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). More coordination is needed with AU representatives to avoid potential friction and to safeguard local agency: The China-AU strategic dialogues and the AU's full membership in the Forum are first steps in this direction. Second, better follow-up mechanisms need to be put in place if China is to be held

accountable for its financial contributions to the AU Peace and Security Council. Third, trilateral cooperation with other external actors, such as the EU and the U.S. will be needed, especially in terms of sharing knowledge in the areas of peacebuilding and conflict management. Recent years' trends suggest that Beijing is more open to cooperating with Western actors, despite some differences in their approaches to aid, development, and security. Fourth, China should use its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council wisely, especially since the UN is the greatest contributor to peacekeeping forces on the continent, and since African countries are still underrepresented in international affairs. Leaders in Beijing should continue to use their influence to promote increased multilateral cooperation between the UN and the AU. Finally, whilst the motto 'African solutions for African problems' underlines the importance of African agency in devising and implementing their own policies, this should not prevent constructive dialogue and exchange of ideas with external partners.

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