

REORDERING INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS: THE *FORUM ON CHINA-AFRICA COOPERATION*

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The emergence of China became clear during the 2000's, which were characterized by the unilateralism of the American superpower under George W. Bush's administration. Those circumstances essentially explain the types of strategy used by China to avoid isolation and defend its interests². This is particularly the case for multilateralism, once regarded with suspicion, which China ended up adopting to the point of making it an essential element of its "grand diplomatic strategy" considering it has a vocation to be reassured, especially at regional level³.

China has therefore engaged itself in a series of privileged partnerships with regional groups such as the European Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ASEAN and many other international and regional organizations⁴. The creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 ought to be placed in that context.

FOCAC can be understood as an imperfect multilateral undertaking knowing that bilateral relations are at the core of the relations between China and African countries both within and outside the institution. Under these conditions, is the need for China to counterbalance U.S. unilateralism sufficient to adequately explain the creation of FOCAC? Is it an organization modeled on other organizations such as the Commonwealth or the International Organization of the Francophonie? Are African countries real actors in this institution or do they revolve around China as it defines its norms and principles for its own benefit?

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² Melvin Gurtov et Peter Van Ness (dir.), *Confronting the Bush Doctrine. Critical Views from South East Asia*, Londres, Routledge, 2005.

³ Avery Goldstein, "The Diplomatic Face of China's Grand Strategy : A Rising Power's Emerging Choice", *The China Quarterly*, vol. 168, 2001, p. 842-844.

⁴ Guogang Wu and Helen Lansdowne, *China Turns to Multilateralism: Foreign Policy and Regional Security*, London, Routledge, 2008.

In this paper, we pursue two objectives. First, we show how the FOCAC participates in China's strategy of building alliances allowing it to better resist U.S. unilateralism and the risks of being contained by its Western rivals in general⁵. Next, we show that, as an institution, FOCAC is a true place of socialization, that is to say, construction and dissemination of standards, practices and behaviors by and between participants and that, far from being a mere instrument manipulated by China, it is both a framework and a tool to shared impacts.

At first, we will briefly sketch the constructivist theoretical and conceptual framework that underlies our argument by using the concepts of soft balancing and socialization. In the next section we will recall the context of the creation of FOCAC, highlighting its institutional features as well as their impact on Sino-African relations. We do not aim to evaluate the adequacy of this institutional tool in relation to stated objectives, but to examine the capacity of this group to influence certain aspects of international politics, forging a shared identity and promoting common practices and interests. We will finally see that, despite the paradoxical characteristics of the institution which remains heavily unbalanced in favor of China, it offers its participants, including African actors often wrongly perceived as victims, a platform that allows the access to both material and symbolic resources that traditional institutional frameworks of cooperation would not confer them.

Soft balancing and socialization: FOCAC from a constructivist perspective

The preeminence of American power since the end of the bipolar era has been exhaustively discussed. In order to know how other states react to this fact, some observers have evoked the adoption of "strategies of opposition" while others spoke of "strategies of accommodation"⁶. In this case, FOCAC can be considered as a multilateral group aiming not only to balance American primacy but also to build an identity and shared interests among its members.

Multilateralism can be broadly understood as an institutionalized collective action by a specific set of independent States. However, it is more operational to focus on the institutional dimension of multilateralism, which refers to any action between three or more States "on the basis of generalized principles of conduct"

⁵ Mamoudou Gazibo et Roromme Chantal, *Un nouvel ordre mondial made in China ?*, Montréal, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2011.

⁶ Read Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to US primacy*, New York, Norton, 2005.

(non-discrimination, indivisibility and reciprocity)⁷. It is then necessary to add a normative dimension that turns this institutional form into a structure capable of creating and promoting common norms⁸.

Contrary to the neoliberal institutionalist approach that advocates the importance of the influence of institutions on State behavior, constructivists argue that the institutions take part in the formation of identities and interests. In this vein, understandings and representations that social agents have of the world are “widely shared”⁹. Indeed, the cognitive patterns that guide the practices of an agent are intersubjective and producers of norms, rules and institutions. For constructivists, those norms and rules are constitutive forces rather than simply regulating ones, that is to say that they make behaviors possible by intervening in the constitution of identities and interests of agents.¹⁰ Institutions are thus fundamentally cognitive entities that do not exist apart from the actors' ideas.

Moreover, the concept of soft balancing helps to explain how China is based, in its international strategy, on *fora* such as FOCAC, the Forum on China-Latin America Cooperation, and the Forum of Sino-Arab Cooperation. Soft balancing is generally defined as any action taken by a weak State to gain influence upon a stronger one. Others limit the concept to the coordinated efforts between less influential countries and to the actions in response to security threats from the hegemonic power¹¹. According to TV Paul, the term refers to a “non-defensive coalition building to neutralize a (...) potentially threatening power.”¹² This author indicates that far from posing a military challenge, soft balancing is an instrument through which middle powers are capable of defying the superpower as for the legitimacy of its policies¹³. Soft balancing, which often takes the form of the use of diplomacy, international institutions, international law, and economic pressures, does not generally inhibit or counteract the superpower, but makes its task harder and heightens the political or financial costs related to it. FOCAC can from this

⁷ John Ruggie, “Multilateralism: the Anatomy of an Institutional Form”, in J. G. Ruggie (dir.) *Multilateralism Matters: the Theory and Praxis of an International Form*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 11.

⁸ According to Marie-Claude Smouts, Building “common sense” is one of one of multilateralism’s functions. Marie-Claude Smouts, *Les Organisations internationales*, 1995, Paris, Armand Colin, p. 29.

⁹ Alex Macleod, Evelyne Dufault and F. Guillaume Dufour (dir.), *Relations internationales. Théories et concepts*, Montréal, Athéna éditions, 200 (2nd edition), p. 32-34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ For the debate on soft balancing, see the 4 related articles at “International Security”, vol. 30, n° 1, Summer 2005.

¹² T.V. Paul, “Introduction: The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory and Their Contemporary Relevance,” in *Balance of Power. Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, ed. T.V. Paul et al. (dir.), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 59

point of view be understood not only as a regulating multilateral organization but also as a norms and interests producing one.

The institutionalization of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and its structuring effects on Sino-African relations

The Forum on Sino-African cooperation¹⁴ is, officially, a platform for collective consultation and dialogue between China and the "African friendly countries". It is presented as a structure of "equal cooperation between countries that have suffered the ravages of colonialism" and wants to be a part of the continuing spirit of Bandung, of the Non-Aligned Movement. Along these lines, the Forum meets to "fight together Western hegemony and dominance" and establish "a new world order".¹⁵

Three aspects are worth noting here: the gradual institutionalization of FOCAC, the structuring effect of the institution on Sino-African economic relations and the emergence, through it, of common political issues.

FOCAC's institutionalization process

FOCAC was launched under President Jiang Zemin on the occasion of the first ministerial conference held in Beijing in October 2000. It gathered 44 African countries, international and regional organizations as well as private sector representatives. This first initiative was attended by the Secretary General of the former Organization of African Unity (OAU) and by heads of state of Algeria, Togo, Tanzania and Zambia.

The Forum's political directorate is defined by the ministerial conference held on a triennial basis alternately in China and in an African country. The first conference approved in October 2000 the founding document entitled "Programme for China-Africa Cooperation in Economic and Social Development", followed by three successive Action Plans (Addis Ababa, Beijing and Sharm el-Sheikh).

After Beijing in 2000, the second ministerial conference was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in December 2003. Along with the prime ministers Wen Jiabao of

¹⁴ This information is available at FOCAC's website, <<http://www.focac.org/>>

¹⁵ « Le nouvel ordre chinois en Afrique », *La Libre Belgique*, April 26, 2006.

the PRC and Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, six heads of State, three vice-presidents, two prime ministers, a president of the Senate, the president of the Commission of the African Union (Alpha Omar Konaré) and the representative of the UN Secretary-General took part in the conference.

From that summit on, we witness a real institutionalization of the Forum. At the Third Ministerial Conference, FOCAC became a summit of the highest level. The Chinese president received 48 African heads of State and Government in Beijing in November 2006. In November 2009, Chinese and African elites met in Egypt on the occasion of the FOCAC's Fourth Ministerial Conference, while the fifth conference will be held during the fall of 2012 in China.

FOCAC has a monitoring mechanism that was created during ministerial consultations between Chinese and Africans held in Zambia in 2001. Put into force in April 2002, the monitoring mechanism is based on meetings between the Chinese Follow-up Committee and African officials. The Chinese monitoring Committee of the Forum, whose secretariat is located in the Africa department of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is chaired by the vice-ministers of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Ministerial conferences are the occasion to announce the decisions adopted during the discussions. These announcements take the form of declarations and Action Plans¹⁶ that recall the principles of Sino-African partnership, review FOCAC's achievements and provide guidance of programmatic nature to cooperation between the parties within the three years that follow each Forum.

¹⁶ Go to FOCAC's website to have access to these documents, <<http://www.focac.org/>>.

Main measures announced by the 2003, 2006 and 2009 Action Plans

<p>Addis Abeba Action Plan (2004-2006)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To strengthen cooperation in the exploration of human resources and to provide multi-sector training to 10,000 Africans; - To implement the zero tariff on imports of certain products from least developed African countries; - To expand cooperation in tourism by granting approved destination status to Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Mauritius, Seychelles, Zimbabwe and Tunisia; - To multiply exchanges between the peoples by organizing the Beijing China-African Youth Festival in 2004.
<p>Beijing Action Plan (2007-2009)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To double the assistance to Africa between 2006 and 2009; - To provide US\$ 5 billion in preferential credit; - To establish a US\$ 5 billion development fund to encourage Chinese investment in Africa; - To cancel heavily indebted and least developed countries' debts; - To remove customs taxes from 440 products of least developed African countries; - To create three to five free trade and economic cooperation areas; - To complete the training of 15,000 African professionals in the following three years, to double the number of university scholarships awarded to African students; - To send 100 agronomists and to open 10 agricultural techniques centers; - To build 300 hospitals, to award US\$ 30 million to the fight against malaria; - To send 300 young volunteers, to build 300 schools.

<p>Sharm el-Sheikh Action Plan (2010-2012)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To establish Sino-African partnerships to fight climate change by achieving 100 clean energy projects (solar, biogas, small hydropower plants); - To implement 100 joint scientific research pilot projects and to receive 100 postdoctoral students in China; - To provide US\$ 10 billion in preferential credit, of which US\$ 1 billion will serve to help small and medium enterprises in Africa; - To award the zero tariff treatment to 95% of the products from least developed countries, 60% by the end of 2010; - To bring up to 20 the number of pilot farms, to send 50 agricultural technical missions and to train 2,000 African agricultural technicians; - To provide material for the anti-malaria centers and to train 3,000 nurses and doctors for Africa; - To build 50 schools, to train 1,500 principals and teachers and to bring up to 5,500 the number of Chinese government scholarships.
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Source : Authors' compilation of the Action Plans of Addis Ababa in 2003, Beijing in 2006 and Sharm el-Sheikh in 2009.

FOCAC and the restructuration of Sino-African economic relations

FOCAC restructures relations between China and Africa from two main angles. Firstly, it produces an effect of coordination in Chinese interventions in Africa and, secondly, it literally boosts the level of cooperation between Africa and China.

FOCAC allows China to better coordinate the actions of its various actors in Africa. Indeed, the increase in Chinese strategic interests in Africa since the second half of the 1990's has turned crucial the question of "the orchestration" of African affairs into the order of the day. Three main actors play a role in relations with the continent: the central and provincial governments, multinational corporations and their representatives and, finally, individual actors, whether private entrepreneurs

or workers. These actors with diverse rationalities (national government's image and international reputation, local priority for the Chinese provinces and regions, Chinese businessmen adventurism and entrepreneurship) are a real challenge to the practice of politics in the continent. In this logic, FOCAC is, above all, an organizational response to the multiplication of interests and to the multitude of players that take part in the definition and implementation of Chinese policy in Africa.

FOCAC then allows an increase both in quantity and quality of wide-ranging interactions between Chinese and Africans, in such a way that one can talk, in certain aspects - and in the case of some African countries - about the *reOrientation* of their international relations.

One surely cannot attribute the expansion of economical and commercial exchanges, the diplomatic renewal and the rapid establishment of Chinese communities in Africa and African in China solely to the decisions taken within FOCAC's framework. Admittedly, however, this institution acts as the catalyst for these developments. Indeed, measures such as the removal of tariffs, the sending of volunteers, the simplification of consular procedures or the provision of grants are now made within FOCAC (see table above). For example, together with FOCAC II, the first Conference of Chinese and African Entrepreneurs was held, at the end of which 21 agreements were signed for a total of US\$ 1 billion.¹⁷

Commercially, the measures taken in Addis Ababa in 2003 and Beijing in 2006 favored the increase of trade volume between China and Africa, which rose from US\$ 10 billion in 2000 to US\$ 124 billion in 2010¹⁸. Also, six economic cooperation zones are under construction, some 1,600 Chinese companies have established themselves in Africa where Chinese direct investments reached US\$ 7.8 billion.

In addition to the vitalization of economic and commercial interests, FOCAC also offers a platform to promote human interaction. We can note a deepening of the cultural and social cooperation between China and Africa (increased number of scholarships from the Chinese government to African students whose presence in the Chinese academic institutions is increasingly important). As an illustration, four of the eight measures announced at the fourth FOCAC conference are directly associated with education and training of professionals. Moreover, cultural

¹⁷ "First Conference of Chinese and African Entrepreneurs", available at <<http://www.focac.org/fra/ltada/dejbjzjhy/INFO2/t163432.htm>>».

¹⁸ « *Chine-Afrique : un immense potentiel de coopération économique* », *Xinhua*, 27 January 2012

exchanges are increasing by the sending of young Chinese volunteers to Africa as well as the hosting of African artists in cultural events in China. Also, since the opening of the first Confucius Institute in Nairobi, Kenya in December 2005, several others followed.¹⁹

There is a debate about the sustainability of Chinese engagement in Africa. Some depict it as subordinated to specific interests such as oil or isolation of Taiwan, and think it will be reduced as the objectives are achieved. However, all indications are that the path taken by Sino-African relations since the establishment of FOCAC is placed in the long term. Indeed, the pivot function held by the Forum in exchanges between China and Africa seems to expand gradually. Sole diplomatic mechanism dedicated to promoting dialogue between China and Africa, FOCAC “facilitates the development of a common political and economic agenda required for the establishment of a mutually beneficial South-South cooperation. As an instrument for strengthening Sino-African cooperation, FOCAC is a structure to develop a common agenda in a deeply globalized international system. FOCAC deliberations brought Chinese and African leaders closer and carved a shared vision in terms of policy coordination, increased commercial interaction and common prosperity.”²⁰

Moreover, this institutionalization is visible in the fact that beyond bilateral relations with African countries and multilateral relations with the continent, China is also developing cooperation with regional or subregional organizations. It cooperates closely with the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), it supports the African Union (AU) in playing an active role in regional and international affairs. The construction of AU new headquarters in Addis Ababa is undoubtedly one of the most symbolic of the increasing attention that the Chinese leaders attach to African regional bodies. In fact, China has launched an annual strategic dialogue with the African Union Commission in 2008²¹ and an economic and trade forum with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Previously, China had appointed representatives to the AU, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), ECOWAS and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). In addition, Beijing has modestly contributed financially to the mission of the African Union in Sudan (Darfur)²² and Somalia.

¹⁹ Confucius Institute Online, <<http://www.confuciusinstitute.net/>>

²⁰ Garth Shelton et Farhana Paruk, *The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: A Strategic Opportunity*, Johannesburg, Institute for Security Studies, 2008, p. 2.

²¹ People's Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “China-AU Strategic Dialogue Officially Launched” 27 November 2008.

²² He Wenping, “China's unceasing efforts to solve Darfur issue”, *China Daily*, 3 January 2008.

This increasingly dense structuration of Sino-African relations results in the increase of common interests to both parties on many levels.

From FOCAC's economic aspects to common projects and political interests

From its inception, FOCAC was presented as an institution to facilitate the cooperation of members in international affairs. As stated in the Beijing Declaration of 2000, the parties engage in the strengthening of the UN role and in the active promotion of the UN and international financial institutions reforms in order to obtain adequate representation of developing countries, Africans in particular. From this perspective, the institution appears to be an instrument to counter unilateralism by creating relationships between States that diametrically break off with the Cold War system²³.

With the recent upheavals in the international arena (affirmation of emerging powers and economic hardship in the West), People's Republic of China publicly aims to contribute to a redefinition of the international system. Its objectives seem to converge around the promotion of South-South cooperation²⁴ that would lead to a world constituted of several power poles. From this perspective, the African participation within the United Nations (nearly a third of the member States) and, consequently, its potential votes in the General Assembly make the continent an actor on which China can rely. Africa, for its part, could also seek support from Beijing on international issues, even within the UN framework.

Officially, one of the objectives of Chinese diplomacy is to build close ties in the South to oppose a unilateral global domination. The multilateral grouping which constitutes FOCAC allows the legitimization of a common front against any global hegemony temptation by renewing the rhetoric of struggle against colonialism and for the emancipation of the peoples of the past. In Addis Ababa in 2003, Premier

²³ Zheng Bijian, "China's Peaceful Rise to Great Power Status", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 84, n° 5, September/October 2005, p. 18-24.

²⁴ In this context, South-South cooperation can be defined as the promotion of economic interactions among developing countries at bilateral, regional and global levels in order to achieve collective self-sufficiency. Considered in this context, cooperation is a process that involves trade and investment growth coupled with technology transfer, and an adequate political and economical cooperation through policy synchronization. See Chris Alden, "Southern Africa in South-South Relations", in Philip Nel, Patrick McGowan (eds.), *Power, Wealth and Global Order*, Rondebosch, University of Cape Town Press, 1999.

Wen Jiabao recalled that “hegemony continues on its way”²⁵, hence the need to oppose it by combining efforts. Indeed, “because of its self-perceived position in the international system, China has constructed a fairly consistent foreign policy aimed at preventing or limiting the development of ‘hegemony’, whilst at the time trying to carve out space for itself as its economy continues to grow.”²⁶

Beyond the strengthening of bilateral and regional cooperation mechanisms with African States, China also favors the strengthening of cooperation and consultation between China and Africa in multilateral *fora* such as the World Trade Organization and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), to coordinate their views and strengthen the bargaining power of developing countries as a group in the definition of the multilateral economic and commercial system and of the rules related to it. Thus, Beijing argues that China and Africa together could help establish a fair and reasonable new economic order²⁷.

Admittedly, as Chinese researcher He Wenping said, China, in its progression to become a pole that counts in the international system “will also need the political and moral support of Africa”.²⁸ But the rhetoric in favor of a more just world receives a positive response in Africa because it corresponds to African objectives.

China is indeed committed, in partnership with Africa through FOCAC, to help improve the position of developing countries in the international arena. Hence their claim for the democratization of international relations and more equality in both political and economical decision-making bodies, including the WTO and the UN. Assiduous observer of institutional mechanisms and workings of the UN, China is now ready to press for institutional reform of the organization for the benefit of the entrance to African countries. From the perspective of the reform of the UN Security Council, for example, China openly supports the admission of African countries in the Security Council. All African countries came together around a proposal, supported by Beijing, which requires two permanent seats with veto power and two additional non-permanent seats for Africa. In this regard, the release of the Beijing Declaration in FOCAC III - adopted jointly - clearly states that: “We call for reform of the UN and other multilateral international institutions to better serve all

²⁵ Wen Jiabao’s speech at FOCAC II Opening Ceremony, Addis Abeba, 15 December 2003. «L’hégémonisme poursuit son chemin».

²⁶ Ian Taylor, *China and Africa: Engagement and Compromise*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 1.

²⁷ Garth Shelton, “China, Africa and South Africa Advancing South-South Co-operation” in Atilio Boron, Gladys Lechini, *Politics and Social Movements in an Hegemonic World: Lessons from Africa, Asia and Latin America*, Buenos Aires, Clacso, 2005, p. 347-383.

²⁸ He Wenping, “The Balancing Act of China’s Africa Policy”, *China Security*, Vol. 3, n° 3, 2007, p. 23-40.

members of the international community. Such reform should aim at increasing the role of the UN, at fully developing the functions of the General Assembly and at paying greater attention to the development issue. Priority should be given to increase the representation and full participation of African countries within the UN Security Council and other UN organs.”²⁹

We can see that FOCAC has become a real institution. It provides a new framework for Sino-African relations, which have made considerable progress in both economical and political spheres on the basis of common interests. This intensification of relations is not only material. It also leads more and more to a change of vision of the actors involved in it.

FOCAC, place of socialization and promotion of norms

Consideration should be given to the FOCAC's socialization function, in the sense of the constructivist approach according to which an institution produces ways of doing and thinking and their internalization within a group. It produces a *habitus*, that is to say, a deeply embedded set of rules that guide sustainable practices, tastes, choices and aspirations of actors that, however, interpret, and also influence, the norms that guide them³⁰.

FOCAC and the building up of a shared identity

The mechanisms to construct such an identity are manifested by the constant invocation of a common past and, above all, by China's self-identification with the Third World, in which Africa takes part. The mobilized vocabulary, most of which converges around targeted expressions such as « common interests », « mutual needs », « mutual trust », illustrates the desire to create an identity linkage.

First, there is a constant reminder of the "common past" from which we aspire to legitimize a common destiny. Having lived in the past under Western domination, FOCAC is the place to recall (by hiding the difficulties encountered in some countries) that China and Africa have always shown each other sympathy and support in the struggle for national liberation and have forged themselves a "deep

²⁹ Beijing Declaration, FOCAC Summit, Beijing, November 2006.

³⁰ The *habitus* is understood as in Pierre Bourdieu's work. See Dominique Bolliet and Jean-Pierre Schmitt, *La socialisation*, Rosny-sous-Bois, Bréal, 2008, 2nd edition, p. 21.

friendship". Here, the Chinese leaders insist on the revolutionary militancy and on Third World solidarity from 1950 to 1970, and call for the advent of a "bright future". During his address at the launch of the FOCAC in Beijing, President Jiang Zemin said: "During the 20th century, (...) the Chinese and African peoples have fought unflinchingly and advanced in successive waves to conquer the independence and national freedom and to achieve peace and development. (...) After breaking the yoke of colonial rule for many centuries, African peoples have won national liberation and became independent of their states (...). The Chinese people, in turn, overthrew the three big mountains: imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism, and proclaimed the People's Republic of China, which he is the master. 31"

History is used to justify current interactions. Chinese discourses unanimously agree to trace the origin of contacts with Africa in a distant past. As recalled by President Hu Jintao at FOCAC III in Beijing: « Despite the geographical distance, the Sino-African friendship is rooted in the depth of the ages and continues to deepen over the years³² ». That is why when one talks about relations with Africa, reference is always made to a historical context.

Beijing insists on History for various reasons : to emphasize the seniority and continuity of that relationship; to bring attention to a common past and shared values (colonialism, racism, Third-worldism, anti-hegemonism) ; to reconcile its status as a great power on the making with its Third World identity. To this end, Chinese prime-minister, Wen Jiabao, stated the following during his address at the opening ceremony of the Forth FOCAC Ministerial Conference in Sharm el-Sheik : « I would like to stress that neither Chinese presence in Africa nor the support African countries give to China have begun today. Already in the 1950s and 1960s, China and Africa fought side by side the the struggle against imperialism, colonialism, and hegemonism, and advanced hand in hand on the arduous path of national economy recovery³³ ».

³¹ « Pour une coopération sino-africaine plus solidaire à l'approche d'un siècle nouveau », President Jiang Zemin's address at the FOCAC I opening ceremony, Beijing, October 10th 2000. "Au cours du 20e siècle, (...) les peuples chinois et africains ont lutté sans fléchir et avancé par vagues successives à la conquête de l'indépendance et de la liberté nationale et pour réaliser la paix et le développement. (...) Après avoir brisé le joug de la domination coloniale plusieurs fois séculaire, les peuples africains ont conquis la libération nationale et accédé à l'indépendance de leurs États (...). Le peuple chinois, de son côté, a renversé les trois grandes montagnes: l'impérialisme, le féodalisme et le capitalisme bureaucratique, et il a proclamé la République populaire de Chine, dont il est le maître".

³² "Malgré l'éloignement géographique, l'amitié sino-africaine plonge ses racines dans la profondeur des âges et ne cesse de s'approfondir au fil des ans".

³³ Wen Jiabao's address at the opening ceremony of FOCAC IV, Charm el-Cheikh, November 8th 2009. "Je voudrais souligner ici que ni la présence chinoise en Afrique, ni le soutien des pays africains à la Chine ne datent d'aujourd'hui. Déjà, dans les années 50 et 60 du siècle dernier, la Chine et l'Afrique ont combattu côte à côte dans la lutte contre l'impérialisme, le colonialisme et

Beyond that, the Chinese leadership always tends to introduce China to its FOCAC partners by emphasizing its nature as a developing country, "China is the largest developing country in the world while the African continent includes, for its part, the largest number of developing countries"³⁴. Such an identity has a highly political connotation, as it should be remembered that it is less on economic factors than political ones that China presents itself as a Third World country. The latter is in fact understood as the world of oppressed and subdued peoples under the domination of the imperialist states³⁵. This identity choice is made despite the fact that China, given its economic strength and its political assets (permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, nuclear power), resembles more the great powers from the North which influence international affairs. This option is nevertheless facilitated by the fact that it is difficult to place China on only one category since it is as much a Third World country as an influential world power. Moreover, unlike many northern countries, it co-produces with African countries, on some essential matters to them, rules with which they can identify themselves.

FOCAC as a forum for the promotion of standards

China has developed a vision of international relations which grants a clear preference for the respect of its partners' sovereignty and the primacy of economic development. Such priorities are diametrically opposed to the primacy of individual freedom and the importance accorded to political reform as promoted by the Western countries. An analysis of important FOCAC documents (Declarations/statements and Plans of action) reveals that within the institution, parties engage in establishing and working on the implementation of certain customs and normative practices such as the sacralization of the state sovereignty principle and the reform of the international economic system.

First of all, sovereignty as a principle has become one of the cardinal points sustained by Chinese governments since the founding of the PRC. It is apparent in discursive and diplomatic practices that China has regularly and assiduously invoked sovereignty as the basis of contemporary international relations and the

l'hégémonisme, et avancé la main dans la main sur le chemin ardu de redressement de l'économie nationale."

³⁴ Speech made by President Jiang Zemin on the opening ceremony of FOCAC I, Beijing, October 10th 2000. "La Chine est le plus grand pays en développement du monde tandis que le continent africain regroupe, pour sa part, le plus grand nombre de pays en développement."

³⁵ François Joyaux, *La tentation impériale. Politique extérieure de la Chine depuis 1949*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1994, p. 329.

cornerstone of international law³⁶. The corollary is that the principle of inviolability of state sovereignty is a distinctive feature of the Chinese conception of international law. The concept of sovereignty and, in particular, the doctrine of "the inviolability of sovereignty" are developed as a "defensive weapon" against interference in internal affairs³⁷. This traditional and rigid doctrine on the principle of sovereignty is recalled on FOCAC speeches and documents. To that matter, on the launching of FOCAC in 2000, President Jiang Zemin stated that « from the History of the last century, we can conclude the following : the people of China and Africa are strongly attached to their national independence³⁸ ».

One of the major explanations for this understanding is the need to isolate Taiwan given the difficulties to bring it back into China. It follows the "One China policy", which restricts diplomatic relations to states that recognize solely the People's Republic of China. FOCAC African members are praised because in their statements they support the project on "the noble cause of Chinese peaceful reunification".

This is a standard fully shared in Africa. To that matter, it is possible to recall that the principles of sovereignty and inviolability of colonial borders are central to African interstate relations. Those rules were not only the founding principles of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in the 1960s, but they largely explain the survival of African states that are weak, multiethnic and randomly shaped by former colonial powers³⁹.

Secondly, the Chinese and the Africans demand a reform of the international economic order. Chinese leaders publicly engage on the promotion of a « fair and rational multilateral trade order » and on increasing the right to an opinion and decision power for the developing countries over international financial affairs. According to the Beijing Declaration from 2006 : « (...) Ministers are unanimous to estimate that given the current unfair and inequitable international order, China and African countries should strive to influence the establishment of a new

³⁶ Wang Tieya, « International Law in China », 221 Collected Courses of *The Hague Academy of International Law*, n° 2, 1991, p. 288.

³⁷ Jerome Cohen and Hungdah Chiu, *People's China and International Law: a Documentary Study*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1974, p. 117-118; Shan Wenhua, « Redefining the Chinese concept of sovereignty » in Wang Gungwu et Zheng Yongnian (dir.), *China and the New International Order*, London, Routledge, 2008., p. 53-80.

³⁸ "de l'histoire du siècle passé, nous pouvons tirer la conclusion suivante: les peuples de Chine et d'Afrique sont farouchement attachés à leur indépendance nationale".

³⁹ Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg «Why Africa's Weak States Persist: The Empirical and the Juridical in Statehood», *World Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Oct., 1982), pp. 1-24.

international order which responds to their needs and interests⁴⁰». In the beginning of the 1980s, China already campaigned against the deteriorating terms of trade, that is to find a balance on international trade between the prices of raw materials and manufactured products imported by Africans. Accordingly, the Chinese prioritize economic development over political reform. Political centralization has created a stable environment without which it is impossible to sustain economic reform⁴¹. African countries which, partly under pressure from Western powers, have been engaged in since the beginning of the 1990s on political reform with mixed results, can only be sensitive to such a concept. Within FOCAC, the Chinese message attached to this principle is well accepted in Africa : « We highlight that the world's diversity must be accepted and preserved, that all countries in the world , big or small, rich or poor, strong or weak, must address each other with esteem, treat each other equally and live under peace and friendship and that different civilizations and development paths must inspire one another, progressing under interaction and coexisting in harmony⁴² ».

As such, FOCAC has become an institution which renews in many aspects the international relations of the parties involved. Does this mean this institution affects the member parties, is affected by them or produces equal results for China and Africa?

FOCAC : asymmetric multilateralism?

Despite the building up of a common identity and shared norms, FOCAC, similarly to other international organizations, is strongly instrumentalized. Instrumentalization as discussed here must be considered both with regards to the most powerful member of FOCAC – China –, as well as for the *a priori* less influential African countries. In such terms, what one observes is an imbalance or asymmetry.

⁴⁰ Preamble from the Programme for Sino-African cooperation on economic and social development, Beijing, October 2000. “(...) Les ministres sont unanimes à estimer que compte tenu de l'actuel ordre international injuste et inéquitable, la Chine et les pays africains doivent s'attacher à influencer sur l'établissement d'un nouvel ordre international qui réponde à leurs besoins et intérêts”

⁴¹ Zhiming Chen, « La voie chinoise de développement », *Études internationales*, vol. XLI, n° 4, 2010, p. 455-483.

⁴² Beijing Summit Declaration on China-Africa Cooperation, November 16th, 2006. “Nous soulignons que la diversité du monde doit être respectée et préservée, que tous les pays du monde, grands ou petits, riches ou pauvres, puissants ou faibles, doivent se témoigner mutuellement de l'estime, se traiter d'égal à égal et vivre dans la paix et l'amitié et que les différentes civilisations et les divers modes de développement doivent s'inspirer les uns des autres, progresser en interaction et coexister dans l'harmonie”

The hierarchical structure of this institution allows China to defend African causes and at the same time pursue its own interests, be them material or symbolic. This grouping also allows small African states to exist on the international scene by compensating their lack of power and « in spite of limited resources, even if symbolically, to project themselves outside their geographic area⁴³». This space works for them as a resonance box which amplifies their demands (respect for sovereignty, increased representation on international financial institutions, etc.). Moreover, in a context where aid and traditional assistance have become rare, China poses within FOCAC as a largely appreciated alternative by African political authorities. Highly significant is the favorable welcoming of Chinese « largesse » and of its capacity to fulfill current and future engagements. That is the meaning of Denis Sassou Nguesso's words, Congolese president (Brazzaville) and then Chairman of the African Union : « *Comme a leur habitude, les autorités chinoises on tenu parole* ». ⁴⁴

Given the disparity between the Chinese leader and African countries, some people generally perceive FOCAC as an instrument to serve the new Chinese economic policy in Africa. Elaborating on the Pekin meeting, an author stated the following : « It is effectively China that invited its new commercial partners to stay for a few days in Beijing » ⁴⁵. To some extent, one cannot refute the existence of several forms of asymetry within the forum. Put in another way, one can effectively notice that interactions are often presented and perceived as China-Africa directed as opposed to Africa-China, even if Africa represents an important asset and provides great resources to China's growth.

Nonetheless, it is China, through its economic and financial capacity, that invests in Africa more than the African countries invest in China. Furthermore, it is the latter that makes promises and performs countless works throughout the continent. In fact, while China is both powerful and determined to pursue its interests, African countries seem to move in unorderedly fashion , without a clear vision of the opportunities African collective action could bring in such an institution. Despite some initiatives by the African Union in the sense, Africans still lack a structured mechanism and they seem, until now at least, to be leaving the command of operations on China's hands.

⁴³ Bertrand Badie, « Le défi de la puissance » in Bertrand Badie et Guillaume Devin (dir.), *Le multilatéralisme: nouvelles formes de l'action internationale*, Paris, La Découverte, 2007, p. 215-232. « malgré des ressources fort limitées, de sortir, ne serait-ce que symboliquement, de leur zone géographique propre »

⁴⁴ « Main basse sur l'Afrique », *Marchés Tropicaux & Méditerranéens*, 10 novembre 2006.

⁴⁵ Antoine Kernén, « Les stratégies chinoises en Afrique : du pétrole aux bassines en plastiques », *Politique africaine*, n° 105, mars 2007, p. 163-180. « Et c'est effectivement la Chine qui a invité ses nouveaux partenaires commerciaux à venir passer quelques jours à Pékin ».

The heterogeneity of African states, which are each at different stages of development, poses as a difficulty to assume command of operations. The situation is not the same whether a country is economically sound or not. South Africa, for example, has fewer difficulties to influence the Chinese agenda since it possesses viable infrastructures and institutions which are able to monitor the behavior of foreign investors⁴⁶. For less economically advanced countries, such an operation is much harder and, by not being able to influence the agenda with China, there is a risk elites will profit from the benefits of FOCAC to consolidate their authority at the expense of their countries' social and economic development. That is the core of concerns over the transparency and governance of the funds allocated by FOCAC. In certain cases, joining the institution may only benefit punctual financial incomes, without a real impact on economic diversification and on living standards.

The exclusion from the Forum of Sino-African Cooperation of African countries which still recognize the Republic of China (Taiwan) also illustrates to the existing imbalance in favor of China within FOCAC. Given the fact that the « One China Policy » is a *sine qua non* condition to official cooperation with China, the only African states absent from the forum are those which entertain relations with Taipei (Burkina Faso, Gambia, Sao Tome e Principe, and Swaziland). From this perspective, China's actions are particularly ambiguous since the sovereignty of friendly African states could exceptionally be bent when it comes to solving an internal dispute : the Taiwan issue.

The same analysis can be made regarding Chinese self-identification with the Third World. Fundamentally, for China it means balancing its Third World identity with its progress towards becoming an influential world power. China, indeed, always fought against isolation and it seeks to maintain one « Chinese » specificity while trying to complete its integration into the international community. Chinese foreign policy continues, nowadays especially, to be motivated by national interests rather than ideology. And its self-identification with the Third World contributes towards fundamental objectives that have not been changed with the renewal of various management teams: to preserve national security and to foster recognition of China's place and role in the world⁴⁷. Indeed, since the founding of the RPC in 1949, Beijing's political rethoric has prioritized relations with Asia, Africa, and Latin America, in other words, the Third World. Actually, China constantly used its relations with the Third World, in this case Africa, to improve its position

⁴⁶ Sanusha Naidu, « The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: What does the future hold? », *China Report*, vol. 43, n° 3, 2007, p. 283-296.

⁴⁷ Craig Harris et Robert Worden, *China and the Third World*, London & Sydney, Groom Helm Ltd, 1986, p. 1-13.

vis-à-vis the United States and the Soviet Union before the latter's desintegration. Mao's Three Worlds theory, as well as the opposition to American hegemony after the Cold War, aim at creating coalitions which work to limit the influence of the superpower. Officially, nevertheless, the will to be a part of the Third World mobilised within FOCAC also seeks to reassure African leaders that, in spite of its emergence to the level of a world power, China will remain faithful to the interests of developing countries. To that matter, there is a foreign policy dilemma that constanly invoques history as a solution⁴⁸.

Also, with regards to the reform of financial and political international institutions, one can have reservations concerning oficial Chinese declarations. Does the PRC really seek to oppose the exclusive great powers club that relies more and more on a « complicity diplomacy⁴⁹ » given the fact that China itself is a member of that club? Chinese scholar Wang Jisi highlights it would be unreasonable for Beijing to directly question the international order and the institutions favoured by the Western world, and that, in fact, such a questioning is unlikely⁵⁰. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with a veto power, China's interests in some perspectives are also as conservative as those of Western countries. In what concerns the UN reform, it is likely that China has no interest to see Japan join the Security Council out of fear that will damage its own prominence on the Asian scene. Some observers believe the new African allies could help China prevent the entrance of the Japanese rival into the Security Council⁵¹. This demonstrates FOCAC's instrumentalization possibilities to serve China's international battles.

Conclusion

African reception of the Sino-African Cooperation Forum has generally been positive, even if, for various reasons, countries expressed reservations, especially South Africa which, through former President Thabo Mbeki, continued to warn against potential imbalances in Sino-African cooperation. We have seen that, to a certain extent, FOCAC is an institution – unbalanced – with a multilateral character which assures socialization by creating linkages, shared practices by its members but

⁴⁸ Chris Alden et Ana Cristina Alves, (2008), « History and Identity in the Construction of China's Africa Policy », *Review of African political economy*, vol. 35, n° 115, March, p. 43-58.

⁴⁹ Bertrand Badie, *La diplomatie de connivence. Les dérives oligarchiques du système international*, Paris, La Découverte, 2011. « diplomatie de connivence »

⁵⁰ Wang Jisi, « Searching for Stability with America », *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 84, n° 5, Sept/Oct. 2005, p. 39-48.

⁵¹ Voir William Leday, « Dimensions politiques du partenariat stratégique Chine-Afrique », *Défense nationale et sécurité collective*, janvier 2007, p. 95-102.

also promoting shared interests and standards, namely sovereignty, the primacy of economic development, and the principles of fairness and equality in international fora.

Such an understanding seems to be unanimous among African members of FOCAC. To that matter, at the end of FOCAC III, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika emphasized this convergent points of view under the following terms : « China and Africa can indeed build a new sort of partnership, mutually beneficial and one that does not endure the consequences of colonial history and of those, damaging ones, induced by a paternalist development aid⁵² ».

Seeking to compensate imbalances (agenda, One China Policy, etc) which are indisputedly in favor of the Chinese leadership within FOCAC, African countries should also be closely involved in the administration and coordination of the follow-up of FOCAC decisions. One can, in fact, deplore the timidity of African engagement: there exists no African follow-up committee on the regional level. This reinforces the tendency to use bilateral negotiations within and outside FOCAC. Such a trend towards bilateralism – which China paradoxically appreciates – may work in favor of clientelist practices by some leaders.

What appears to be « *multilatéralisme d'apprentissage* » could prove to be a particularly effective weapon to deal as a group with other extra-continental partners, as well as within other multilateral fora. The African Union seems to have understood the urgency of the situation since it adopted one of the recommendations made by a especially commissioned team to reflect upon which actions to take regarding emerging countries. The team concluded that Africa should develop a clear strategy in order to avoid the build up of a second colonization and it should effectively use its natural resources to accelerate the continent's industrialization process⁵³.

Certainly, far from being based solely on the idealist sharing of values and common interests, FOCAC is a project marked by the usage of *soft power*⁵⁴, that is

⁵² « La Chine et l'Afrique peuvent, en effet, tabler sur un partenariat de type nouveau, mutuellement avantageux et qui n'a pas à pâtir des conséquences de l'histoire coloniale et de celles, dommageables, induites par une aide au développement paternaliste. » Statement by Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in the occasion of the China-Africa Summit, available at <<http://www.el-mouradia.dz/>>, November 2006.

⁵³ « African Countries Draft Plan for Relations with 'Emerging Powers' Like China, India and Brazil », *World Politics Review*, 23 octobre 2006, disponible à <<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articlePrint.aspx?ID=279>>

⁵⁴ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004., p. 5-11.

to say, usage of economic and persuasive power as well as the offer of political and diplomatic support by China to influence the choices of African countries. Nonetheless, this institution also poses as a multilateral group used by its members to multiply their power: it is a relay of the claims made by small African states and of the international prestige of a rising power like China. Even if, twelve years after its launching, FOCAC's long term perspectives are unclear – one must always rely on triennial programmes made by China -, it is certain, nevertheless, that this institution serves its members as well as its members benefit from it.

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ABSTRACT

China's rise became evident at the turn of the century in a context of American unilateralism under the command of George W. Bush. This context explains, to a large extent, Chinese strategies to avoid isolation and defend its interests. As such, China has chosen to act through multilateralism, previously viewed with suspicion, but now sought as an essential element to its diplomatic strategy, especially at the regional level.

In this context, FOCAC can be understood as an imperfect multilateral undertaking knowing that bilateral relations are at the core of the relations between China and African countries both within and outside the institution. Is FOCAC an organization similar to the Commonwealth or the International Organization of La Francophonie? Are African countries true actors in this institution or do they orbit around China while it defines the rules and principles to be enacted and profits from them alone?

Given all that was stated above, this paper has two main objectives. First, we seek to demonstrate in which ways FOCAC is part of an alliance building strategy to allow China to better resist American unilateralism and the risks of being stopped by its Western rivals. Then, we will show that, as an institution, FOCAC is a place of socialization, that is, a place where standards, practices and patterns of behavior are set and disseminated. As such, far from being a mere instrument manipulated by China, it is both a framework and a tool with shared impacts. In order to achieve both our goals, at first we will outline the theoretical and conceptual background to guide our work – constructivist theory – resorting to the concepts of soft balancing and socialization. After that, a thorough explanation of FOCAC's history will be presented, highlighting institutional characteristics and their impact on China-Africa relations.

KEYWORDS

Multilateralism; International Institutions; FOCAC; *Soft balancing*; Socialization; Asymmetric relations.