



South Africa and FOCAC: Enabling a Partnership for Global Economic Governance Beyond the BRICS?

SANUSHA NAIDU

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December 2015, South Africa will host the first Heads of State Summit of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Africa. Given the high level status accorded to the 6th FOCAC meeting, the forum promises to further enhance relations between China and African countries through a package of political, economic, social and cultural deals and exchanges that will be implemented over the next three years. But with South Africa serving as co-chair of FOCAC until 2018, can Pretoria use the platform to advance its foreign policy vision of a global governance agenda for reform and development? This policy insights paper addresses this and other related questions around whether Pretoria can consolidate alliances outside BRICS with a view to strengthening its agenda on global political and economic governance. In particular, it will consider whether South Africa can and will use its diplomatic weight in FOCAC to change the way in which economic governance issues are debated, discussed and resolved at the global level.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SANUSHA NAIDU is a research associate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Pretoria; senior research associate with the Institute of Global Dialogue; and programme manager of Fahamu’s Emerging Powers in Africa project.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2015, South Africa will host the sixth ministerial meeting of FOCAC. With South Africa currently serving as co-chair of the forum, the meeting is an important moment for Sino–South African ties. The Zuma administration will seek to deepen its relations with both China and the African continent. In recent years the engagement between Beijing and Pretoria has strategically increased from that of a partnership to one that is now being labelled as a comprehensive strategic partnership, officially adopted during President Jacob Zuma’s state visit to China in December 2014.¹ According to China’s ambassador to South Africa, Tian Xuejun, this ‘triple development jump’ in relations signifies ‘practical co-operation in various fields between China and South Africa’ aimed at fast-tracking development.²

While all signs indicate the strengthening of Sino–South African relations, of particular interest are the opportunities the South African government can maximise in hosting and chairing FOCAC over the next three years. At the heart of the discussion is whether and, if so, how, Pretoria can align FOCAC’s institutional framework with its broader continental and global governance engagements. More importantly, there is the pertinent issue of what synergies the Zuma administration will effect through the FOCAC platform to strengthen its African agenda and, in particular, inform the continent’s political and economic development roadmap.

In accepting the invitation to host the sixth Ministerial FOCAC Summit, which has been turned into a Heads of State Summit, during the fifth FOCAC meeting, South Africa’s Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Maite Nkoana-Mashabane affirmed that as co-chair, South Africa³

[w]ill concentrate its efforts on ensuring a greater role for an involvement of the African Union Commission [AUC] in the FOCAC process, as well as on maintaining close relations with the Regional Economic Communities and the AU’s flagship programme for socio-economic development, NEPAD [New Partnership for Africa’s Development], [and] continue to advocate for Africa’s developmental agenda and ensure that the values of FOCAC, as well as those of Pan-Africanism, are realized.

These remarks signal what has become a long-standing precept in South Africa’s foreign policy behaviour and positioning in international political and economic relations, namely that enhancing Africa’s development, integration and unity is pivotal to the country’s foreign policy choices and decisions. This has become apparent in how South Africa defines its identity in multilateral forums, which include the UN Security Council; the G-20 (as the only African actor); BRICS; the G-8; and the G-77 + China; as well as in continental initiatives such as NEPAD and the institutional transformation of the Organization of African Unity into the AU. This is highlighted by Le Pere, who notes that Pretoria’s multilateral activism as a ‘norm entrepreneur’ is underlined by the ‘principled belief [that] multilateralism stems from the possibilities of promoting global

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justice and equity through international co-operation and upholding the canons of international law' wherein 'reform of the multilateral system has been the important impulse'.⁴ Ostensibly, then, for South Africa, its multilateral engagements toward an equitable, rule-based international order are expressed in its official narrative on Africa's renewal and integration into international diplomacy, which is intrinsically linked to South Africa's own global ambitions and development aspirations.⁵

However, does FOCAC offer South Africa the policy platform to advance this symbiotic vision of its African policy and the global governance agenda for reform and development?

This question will drive how South Africa takes advantage of its position and structures its engagement in FOCAC over the next three years. Unfortunately, the question is underlined by a set of assumptions about the way in which South Africa should interpret its role in FOCAC. The real issue is, how does Pretoria see its engagement in FOCAC: in the same way that it envisions its interactions and priorities in the G-20, BRICS or the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) trilateral? Or does it place a different emphasis on FOCAC?

This policy insights paper seeks to understand whether consolidating alliances outside BRICS towards other multilateral governance structures is an alternative avenue for Pretoria to strengthen its agenda on global political and economic governance. Specifically, it explores the extent to which South Africa's positioning and proposed engagement within FOCAC can help manage its broader global governance identity and objectives. In doing so, it will consider whether South Africa can and will use its diplomatic weight in FOCAC to change the way in which economic governance issues are debated, discussed and resolved at the global level. In a similar vein, the paper will also look at how China, as an actor in BRICS and the principal agent in FOCAC, identifies its own role in these two blocs. It concludes with an assessment of African agency in FOCAC and what this means for South Africa's chairing of and positioning within the forum during its term as co-chair.

SOUTH AFRICA'S IDENTITY AND OBJECTIVES IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Officially, South Africa perceives its role in global governance as that of contributing to the transformation of a global system that has become increasingly based on uneven power relations. In Pretoria's view, the reordering of the global system entails strengthening the rules-based focus, aligned to a just and equitable world order.⁶ In line with its own experience, South Africa pursues a global reform agenda that is in favour of a fairer distribution of power and resources.⁷ On another level, it wants to promote the interests of developing countries with regard to poverty reduction, debt relief and the democratisation of international relations by assuming a leadership role in multilateral forums such as the AU, the Non-Alignment Movement, the G-77 + China, various UN

structures and SADC. Of particular interest in these high-level interactions with developed and developing countries is its desire to advocate for the reformation of multilateral forums, especially the UN Security Council and the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, or IMF). In many ways, these are what Pretoria identifies as its global interests, which support the need for building a just and fair world through a multilateral approach, as was underlined by Nelson Mandela in his 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article.⁸

Of crucial significance, however, is the way in which Pretoria has articulated its aspirations for a just, equitable and stable international system. The narrative underpinning Pretoria's foreign policy foundations of peace, stability and development is intimately related to redefining the power structures through which continental and ultimately global governance arrangements are developed, to reflect the changing structure of the international system.

According to Nkoana-Mashabane, South Africa's role is conceived and defined as 'a progressive agent for positive change'.⁹ Pretoria hopes to project, as Alden and Schoeman state, the image of 'a global player, which includes elements of mediator-integrator, bridge, anti-imperialist agent, developer, and regional leader and protector'.¹⁰ In articulating these competing roles, the question is which one best captures South Africa's approach to continental and global governance. Dr Rob Davies, Minister of Trade and Industry, has described the three possible scenarios for South Africa's African engagements:¹¹

- a 'South Africa first' approach, wherein Pretoria pursues a parochial agenda based on its own interests without regard for its regional neighbourhood or the broader implications for the continent;
- a 'benign hegemonic' approach, in which Pretoria would seek to endorse the rules of the game and undertake the provisioning of public goods based on what it sees as its national interests, interlinked with those of the region and the continent; or
- a 'partnership through co-operation' approach, based on building and developing collaborations through consensus on related matters of global governance, underpinned by regional mutual interests and continental affairs.

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The third scenario perhaps best encapsulates how South Africa perceives its role and identity as a global governance pragmatist. It also disaggregates the image of Mandela's post-apartheid state as a 'responsible global citizen'.¹² To this end, Pretoria's plan to reform the international system relies on a collective effort, which is why it is keen to establish partnerships with strategic actors from the Global South whose global conduct shares a similar attitude and trajectory.

From this standpoint one needs to appreciate how bilateral engagements inform South Africa's multilateral positions and, importantly, the interplay between these two foreign policy spheres. The relationship between South Africa and China is one such area of interest.

CONTEXTUALISING SINO–SOUTH AFRICAN RELATIONS BEYOND THE BILATERAL¹³

Since China's establishing the 'One China' policy and formalising diplomatic ties in 1998,¹⁴ relations between Beijing and Pretoria have strengthened substantively. South Africa is one of China's strategic partners in global political and economic affairs as well as in terms of its African engagements. Both sides rely on their principles and values to resolve concerns in global undertakings.

Zuma described the current status of the engagement during his state visit in December 2014 as one that is 'ready to advance economic partnership with China in pursuit of inclusive growth and job creation'.¹⁵ During the same visit Zuma also noted that China is keen to participate in and share lessons for the implementation of Operation Phakisa, South Africa's blue economy programme.¹⁶ Clearly, this visit renewed South Africa's economic engagement with China. It also cemented Beijing's status as a strategic partner in Pretoria's national development priorities, especially the country's socio-economic development plans.

This can be seen in the raft of agreements that was signed during the visit. These include:¹⁷

- 5–10 Year Strategic Programme on Cooperation between the two sides, which focuses on various forms of bilateral cooperation, including mutual political trust and strategic coordination, mutually beneficial economic cooperation and trade, people-to-people exchanges and cooperation, African affairs and China–Africa relations, and cooperation in international affairs and BRICS-related issues;
- To further improve Economic Cooperation in Trade and Investment between the Ministry of Trade and Industry of the Republic of South Africa and the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China;
- Action Plan on Agricultural Cooperation between the Republic of South Africa and the People's Republic of China (2014–2016);
- Protocol of Phytosanitary Requirements for the Export of Maize from the Republic of South Africa to the People's Republic of China;
- Protocol of Phytosanitary Requirements for the Export of Apple Fruit from the Republic of South Africa to the People's Republic of China; and
- Protocol of Phytosanitary Requirements for the Export of Dates from the People's Republic of China to the Republic of South Africa.

In addition, commitments were also signed to build human resources and capacity. Accordingly, China agreed to increase short-term development courses and extend participation in training programmes to 2 000 trainees from 2015–2020. China also agreed to assist and support South Africa's proposed industrial agenda, especially in the areas of science and technology, industrial parks and railway parks, where the two countries agreed to facilitate inward buying for sector-specific valued products. Finally, China was encouraged to increase investment in economic zones and industrial parks.

The visit also yielded renewed guarantees on the global front in the area of multilateralism. Of particular importance is China's interest in using its BRICS membership to increase economic opportunities and market access through the establishment of the African Regional Centre of the New Development Bank (NDB).

The visit thus signalled the consolidation of bilateral ties. It was also intended to deepen China's commitments to South Africa's key economic and development priorities. This should not be viewed as something exceptional, since the nature of bilateral visits and engagements is about extracting the best possible agreements in the national interest.

The relationship between Pretoria and Beijing has advanced to the highest official level. However, engagements are also surrounded by complexities, especially when there is asymmetry in trade and investment. Whereas both sides showcase what Alden and Wu claim is a 'complementarity of interests', they also note that there are 'barriers to the deepening of ties'¹⁸ that may emasculate relations. For instance, South Africa's broader international multilateral objectives could weaken when it tries to navigate between continental priorities and obligations and the consensus on global governance reform framed in blocs such as BRICS and IBSA. A case in point is reform of the UN Security Council. South Africa is a signatory to the African Ezulwini Consensus, which demands two permanent UN Security Council seats for Africa with the right to veto. In contrast, Brazil and India as part of the G-4 have argued for an extension of permanent seats in the UN Security Council but without veto rights. Here South Africa is caught between the African position and that of its IBSA partners. If South Africa chooses to push for progress and break this stalemate by aligning with the G-4 position, it may risk the support it needs from the African bloc at the continental level and at the UN Security Council when it comes to deciding which country should get the permanent seat.¹⁹

Where does this leave FOCAC in South Africa's relationship with China? Alden and Wu have noted that South Africa has actively tried to influence FOCAC. It has made a concerted effort to ensure that the African voice is not passive and, more importantly, to negotiate balanced access to trade and investment relations, the beneficiation of African resources within the continent, and commitments to environmental and labour standards.²⁰ But is this enough for FOCAC to be considered a vehicle through which South Africa can fulfil its global political and economic governance aspirations?

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BETWEEN BRICS AND FOCAC

It would seem that in trying to understand South Africa's global governance arrangements, the formation of BRICS is a critical aspect. BRICS has come to identify itself as the bloc that will advance the global governance agenda. Intriguingly, as BRICS is seemingly frustrated with the slow pace at which voting rights and quotas are evolving in the IMF,²¹ it has begun to set up its own

parallel institutions. Establishing the NDB has been a strategic milestone for BRICS,²² as it signifies the formation of a new global order. The NDB illustrates the nature and institutional architecture of BRICS's framework. It shows that the levels of accountability and governance defined by the BRICS countries are based on the objectives they want to achieve; and hence the responsibility rests with them when it comes to BRICS's governance mandate.

Moreover, BRICS is what Kornegay calls 'a major coalitional actor within a global "terrain of struggle" over the future shape of the international system'.²³ This characterisation is thought provoking in the context of global economic governance, as BRICS will determine how this struggle is defined. For BRICS the reformation of global governance institutions is also borne out of its own growing status in the global system. At the same time, most of the BRICS countries do not dismiss engaging with the West in some endeavours.

The striking feature of BRICS, in the context of global economic governance, is that its identity is derived from a broad consensus that the global status quo cannot continue. It is this focus that binds the BRICS countries together.

From this perspective, China and South Africa view their participation in BRICS as redressing the inequities of the global system; rectifying imbalances in the global distribution of power; and, through a reformed global architecture, underpinning sustainable development through inclusivity and benefits accruing to all citizens. This is the essence around which the BRICS partnership is built. By the same measure, what makes BRICS more flexible is the fact that the BRICS countries set their own co-operation frameworks. They are the constituent actors that drive the engagement. They set up the parameters of institutional arrangements and identify areas of co-operation based on both domestic and global imperatives, which is the foundation of the relationship.

FOCAC, on the other hand, is the formalisation of the relationship between Africa and China. In the case of Africa it is more about the continent's multilateral approach to its engagement with China, while for China it is about how that engagement is structured and formalised. FOCAC's meetings take place every three years, which also distinguishes it from BRICS with its yearly summits. Moreover, FOCAC is confined to African states that recognise the 'One China Policy' and Beijing as the principal actor, whereas BRICS involves the potential for a broader range of engagements. For example, South Africa initiated the Africa Outreach Partnership during its hosting of the fifth BRICS Summit in Durban in 2013, and Brazil followed suit at the sixth BRICS Summit in Fortaleza in 2014 by hosting the Union of Southern American States engagement.

FOCAC represents a strategic pillar of development diplomacy aimed at enhancing Sino-African engagements. However, the real issue is how its agenda is set and to what extent the process is accountable and monitored. It does seem as though China plays a central role in FOCAC's institutional architecture, especially in how and when sub-forums are created. This is reflected in Anshan *et al.*'s discussion paper in which FOCAC's architecture is explained. Clearly,

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from the various committees set up to oversee FOCAC mechanisms, China's engagement is more formalised compared with that of its African counterparts.²⁴ In addition, the FOCAC narrative on global economic governance is more rhetorical than actually being geared towards pushing for a significant and strategic recalculation of the way in which the global order is organised.

FOCAC is thus about articulating a model of co-operation with Africa. Whether this model embeds any global economic governance interventions alongside structures such as BRICS and the G-20 is hard to discern. To extrapolate how FOCAC aligns with global economic governance posturing it is perhaps best to examine how China and South Africa align their objectives in platforms such as BRICS to the issues they are pursuing at the continental level. In this regard, one recurring theme is that Africa's integration into a reformed global system is central to Africa and China's mutual benefits. But it is African and Chinese interests that underline the FOCAC framework.

THE 'AFRICA FACTOR' IN FOCAC AND BRICS

As mentioned previously, comparing the global economic governance dimensions in BRICS and FOCAC is a difficult task since both platforms have specific mandates.

A critical issue in assessing South Africa's actions in both platforms is the fact that in BRICS, South Africa speaks for Africa, while in FOCAC South Africa is only one African voice among many, and has to negotiate with its fellow African countries to reach consensus on those issues it wants to drive.

There is a view in BRICS that, through South Africa, the other BRICS countries will enlarge their footprint on the continent. While this may hold true in certain cases, each of the BRICS partners have established and pursued their own bilateral engagements with various African countries, whether through FOCAC, the India–Africa Forum Summit or the Brazil–Africa Forum. Each of these undertakings shows that the advancement of interests in Africa in BRICS is not contingent on South Africa's presence. However, South Africa has strategically positioned itself in BRICS to ensure that Africa is not left behind when it comes to development financing for infrastructure projects through the NDB. The formation of the African Regional Centre of the NDB is a case in point.

In the case of FOCAC, South Africa's voice forms part of the collective, in which Pretoria has to pursue its agenda based on the broader interests of the African bloc. More importantly, FOCAC is an opportunity for African countries to leverage their engagement with China via the raft of preferential political, economic, social and development measures instituted by Beijing.

REFLECTING ON THE ISSUES

While FOCAC identifies with the narrative of the global governance agenda,

and China to a certain extent remains consistent about the importance of a reformed international order, it seems unlikely that FOCAC can become a platform 'beyond the BRICS'. There are several reasons for this.

First, FOCAC is a continental programme that defines the mutual interests of Africa and China. This does not mean that continental and global multilateral governance issues are ignored. What it does suggest, however, is that FOCAC has a specific mandate around how China can contribute to and work with African states on the continent's development requirements.

Second, FOCAC represents only one element of China's broader set of global engagements. The Chinese government in its own strategic calculations would prefer to use its presence in larger multilateral platforms to advocate the agenda for global economic governance. China is about pragmatic engagement and not overshooting agendas in different platforms.

Third, Africa's mandate in FOCAC remains a moot point and it is therefore difficult to discern whether South Africa can use FOCAC to realise its global economic governance objectives.

Fourth, FOCAC is implemented bilaterally, and the AU Commission (AUC) thus needs to play a greater role in co-ordinating FOCAC processes. While the AUC was formally admitted as a full member of FOCAC at the 2012 meeting it needs to become more prominent, as it is the executive body of the AU. Further complicating the AUC's potential role in FOCAC are those African countries that still recognise Taiwan and, of course, the Morocco question.

Fifth, as much as South Africa and China may emphasise the global economic governance reform of institutions such as the IMF, it remains unclear how they synchronise their agendas when it comes to issues regarding the World Trade Organization (WTO). Unresolved tensions over market measures and subsidies and investment-related issues, especially related to the Doha Development Round, indicate that Beijing and Pretoria disagree about tariff and non-tariff barriers that may be seen as protectionist measures.

Finally, trying to position FOCAC via a global economic governance lens implies that China views the continent in the same way South Africa does. This is a myopic assumption. The place Africa holds in China's policies differs substantially from the pivotal role it plays in South Africa's global strategy. FOCAC is about how China strengthens its engagements with Africa, rather than how it sets global agendas. By default and through broader coalescing at the international level, FOCAC may yet come to articulate the broader global governance interests of China and South Africa. But this is clearly not the business of FOCAC. South Africa may find that it can play a constructive role in those areas where Africa's global economic governance engagements are at risk. These include issues linked to the treatment of trade and investment; environmental and labour codes of conduct; and increasing Africa's voice in forums such as the G-20, WTO and the UN Security Council. Through championing such issues, which Pretoria does, the opportunity to construct

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a dialogue aimed at pursuing an African consensus can be used to shape the FOCAC engagement outside the formal structure.

CONCLUSION

There is a perception that, through South Africa's global governance engagements, it is trying to reform the rules of the game by enabling the provisioning of public goods based on what it sees as its national interests, interlinked with those of the region and the continent in a somewhat benign hegemonic approach. At the same time, it is forging partnerships with African countries and actors from the Global South based on consensus and co-operation on matters of multilateral reform and mutual interest.

In hosting FOCAC, South Africa has an opportunity to shape the economic governance process over the next three years at a continental level. South Africa can use its position to advocate for better engagement on continental governance issues that will advance Africa's interests in FOCAC. For instance, in 2012, Zuma noted that the imbalance in Africa's relations with China was 'unsustainable'.²⁵ To mitigate this South Africa has championed greater investment through FOCAC on infrastructure projects that can expand and improve regional integration initiatives and strengthen intra-regional trade. It is also keen to ensure that the continent's resource sector sees more beneficiation at source through value added production. This will probably be an important agenda item at the upcoming FOCAC meeting. Therefore, over the next three years, South Africa can set a clear agenda for natural resource management that defines labour and environmental codes and enhances governance measures on the continent. Aligning to continental initiatives such as the African Mining charter can offset the more politically sensitive issues of how the AUC's role can be structured, in light of the Taiwan and Morocco issues.

In addition, South Africa can also develop, with African states, a monitoring and evaluation framework to assure the quality of infrastructure projects. To this end, there need to be better project-related feasibility studies that push the integration agenda forward. This is especially relevant when it comes to assessing the impact of such projects on the livelihoods and socio-economic development of affected communities.

These two areas, in addition to others, are where South Africa can calibrate its focus in FOCAC over the next three years. At the same time, FOCAC also represents a bilateral set of opportunities for South Africa to exploit. Although South Africa will be more geared towards promoting a broad African agenda in FOCAC, the forum has become a platform for individual African countries seeking to advance their national interests.

Clearly, South Africa has a vested interest in realising its objectives, whether it is under the Programme for Infrastructure in Africa or the North–South corridor. All of this conforms with how South Africa perceives its African agenda in relation to its broader governance interests.

That said, FOCAC should not be inflated as something 'beyond BRICS' in respect of global governance issues. FOCAC is instead part of China's multi-layered approach to engineering its engagements. At the same time, the actors and decision makers underpinning the FOCAC process differ from how BRICS is constructed, despite both being defined by interstate alliances. FOCAC diverges from BRICS in how continental governance frameworks can become significant areas of complementing interests. That is to say, it is in China's interest to consider how these governance initiatives (such as the one identified above) can inform Africa's engagement in FOCAC. FOCAC offers a more practical level of co-operation in this regard.

Finally, the upcoming FOCAC meeting will be the first Heads of State Summit under President Xi Jinping to be hosted in Africa. It will be instructive to see how the new Chinese administration takes the FOCAC process forward on the basis of a more balanced engagement. The Memorandum of Understanding on infrastructure signed between China and the AUC on the sidelines of the January 2015 AU Summit and the setting up of a permanent mission at the AU are signs that China is upping the ante in its engagements with Africa. It may also be that the AUC is preparing to undertake a strategic role in FOCAC – to strengthen the African voice in the FOCAC process and implementation.

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Jan Smuts House, East Campus,
University of the Witwatersrand
PO Box 31596, Braamfontein
2017, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel +27 (0)11 339-202
Fax +27 (0)11 339-2154
www.saiia.org.za
info@saiia.org.za

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