

Synergy in Motion

China helps bring opportunities to Africa through the alignment of diverse initiatives. By He Wenping

Following the 10th BRICS Summit in South Africa in July, the Beijing summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in September will be another major event this year that draws attention to Africa and its strengthening ties with China.

FOCAC, established in 2000, has served as an important engine driving China-Africa collaboration. Since its inception, cooperation in various fields such as trade, investment, project contracting, development assistance, cultural exchanges, finance and security has made great headway. For example, China surpassed the United States to become Africa's largest trading partner in 2009 and has remained in that position for nine consecutive years. Africa is China's third-largest outbound investment destination and the second-largest overseas market for Chinese contractors. By the end of 2017, China's investment in Africa exceeded \$100 billion, with more than 3,500 Chinese companies operating in African countries.

FOCAC summits in Beijing in 2006 and Johannesburg in 2015 both pushed China-Africa relations to new heights. At this year's Beijing summit, Chinese and African leaders will gather again to advance China-Africa relations. Notably, China is synergizing various platforms, such as FOCAC, BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative, to promote African development.

Gateway to Africa

With the convening of the BRICS Johannesburg summit, the world's gaze was fixed on a mechanism that consists of emerging markets and developing countries,



The author is a senior researcher with the Charhar Institute and a researcher with the Institute of West-Asian and African Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

with members from Asia, Africa, Europe and South America.

When former chairman of Goldman Sachs asset management Jim O'Neil coined the BRIC acronym (Brazil, Russia, India and China) in 2001, it was merely a concept classifying the most promising and attractive emerging markets for multinationals, according to economic indicators, such as population, resources, market potential and GDP growth. It was not until eight years later that the leaders of these countries held their first summit.

The addition of South Africa in 2010 was indicative of other member nations' recognition of the African continent's rising status and development potential. Though a latecomer, as the only African country in the group, South Africa plays an increasingly significant role in facilitating BRICS-Africa collaboration.

South Africa constitutes nearly a quarter of Africa's GDP, but its economic aggregate is considerably lower than other BRICS members, at only about a quarter of Russia's, which itself was the lowest in the original BRIC group. Despite this, South Africa serves as a gateway for other BRICS countries to reach out to Africa.

South Africa's membership also shows the group's vision, which extends beyond the scope of economics to much broader areas, such as international politics and geo-strategic structures. With the rapid rise of the collective strength of developing countries, and as their cooperation gains momentum, BRICS has now developed into a new platform for emerging markets and developing countries to strengthen multilateral consultation and joint action.

Thanks in part to growing economic and trade relations between BRICS and African countries, Africa has emerged from the international financial crisis and the wake of unrest in North Africa, and is in the process of rapid recovery. African economies and BRICS nations are committed to supporting each other through mutually beneficial programs.

The BRICS New Development Bank, whose mission is to boost infrastructure

construction and green energy development, launched its Africa Regional Center (ARC) in Johannesburg in August 2017, a move that highlighted BRICS' determination to fulfill its commitment to Africa's sustainable development. In the future, the ARC will, with its financial capital and project development expertise, greatly contribute to African integration as well as industrialization and infrastructure upgrades on the continent.

At the Johannesburg summit, leaders endorsed the BRICS Partnership on New Industrial Revolution, an initiative jointly proposed by China and South Africa. It aims to hasten the process of replacing old economic drivers with new ones by working more closely together in areas such as digitalization, industrialization, innovation and inclusive growth. The initiative will become a flagship program for BRICS and is expected to play a key role in enhancing the group's competitiveness in the international arena.

The BRICS Plus model, initiated at the Xiamen summit in China in 2017, continued in Johannesburg. Representatives from a number of African countries and other emerging markets were invited to an outreach session. Wider engagement is conducive to making BRICS more influential, while cementing the partnership between the BRICS and African countries.

Building connectivity

Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative, also known as the Belt and Road Initiative, in 2013, with the aim of building a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa, based on the ancient Silk Road trade routes. Many countries in Africa are enthusiastic about participating in the initiative. Shortly after the close of the annual sessions of the National People's Congress, China's top legislature, and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the country's top political advisory body, in March, the presidents of



South African students celebrate graduating from the Huawei Authorized Information and Network Academy, a training program offered by the Chinese tech company.

Cameroon, Namibia and Zimbabwe visited China and expressed their hopes of aligning their own development strategies with the Belt and Road Initiative.

In July, during his first foreign tour after being reelected as Chinese president in March, Xi visited four African countries in addition to attending the BRICS summit in Johannesburg. This trip saw China's signing of memorandums of understanding on jointly pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative with Senegal and Rwanda. Mauritius also reached an agreement with China to finalize a similar document as soon as possible.

Driven by the Belt and Road Initiative, improving infrastructure interconnectivity and strengthening industrial capacity cooperation have become key areas of China-Africa relations. It is the new consensus of China and African nations to promote industrial development and reduce poverty through investment in infrastructure-related projects within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

In order to push forward Africa's industrialization, China has established the China-Africa Fund for Industrial Cooperation with startup capital of \$10 billion. It has also increased the capital of the China-Africa Development Fund and the Special Loan for the Development of African Small and

Medium-Sized Enterprises by \$5 billion each.

Remarkable results have been achieved in recent years, including the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, which opened in October 2016, and the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway in May 2017. The construction of industrial parks along these rail routes has seen preliminary success.

The FOCAC Beijing summit will seek to integrate the Belt and Road Initiative, the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the African Union's Agenda 2063 and African countries' own development strategies. Based on this synergy, new measures will be unveiled to further the China-Africa partnership.

Promoting understanding

As China-Africa relations flourish, however, bitter feelings and jealousy have surfaced in certain quarters. Some politicians, media outlets and NGOs that presume their interests in Africa are being encroached upon have misread China's involvement, accusing the country of plundering African resources, damaging the local environment and supporting "failed states."

However, according to a 2017 McKinsey report, 89% of employees at surveyed Chinese-owned companies in Africa were

African, most of whom underwent considerable skills training. "On balance, we believe that China's growing involvement is strongly positive for Africa's economies, governments, and workers," said the report.

Those accusations are far-fetched with hardly any factual basis. The Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, for instance, is a telling example of balancing modernization and environmental protection. Moreover, thriving China-Africa trade, which has contributed to 20% of Africa's economic growth in recent years, coupled with China's assistance in infrastructure construction, poverty alleviation and personnel training, has helped solidify economic and human resource foundations for Africa's democracy and good governance. China and African countries also share experience through political party and think tank dialogues, which some have misinterpreted as an attempt to export the Chinese model. In the final analysis, though, it is up to Africans to choose their own path of development. ■



Scan QR code to visit *Beijing Review's* website
Comments to yanwei@bjreview.com