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China-Africa relations in 2012 – Harmony is quite a task in the auspicious Year of the Dragon

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As many parts of the world put the recent festive season to rest and clamber into 2012, the world's most populous country and the second largest economy is busily preparing to welcome the Year of the Dragon. For China, last year, the Year of the Rabbit, was one of careful consolidation and reinforcement of its international stature, from attention to the trembling Eurozone economies, to intermittent face offs with the Federal Reserve in Washington over the value of the Yuan Renminbi, to manoeuvres within dynamic new global alliances such as the BRICS. Sino-African relations similarly reflected this careful atmosphere of consolidation - some feat given the deep political and economic penetration of China in many African states on one hand, and the bitter tumult experienced in a handful of African countries that witnessed violent protests against governments, and even overthrow of those regimes.

Africa's political landscape wasn't all that easy for Beijing in 2011 and will likely to remain tricky for 2012. While things may have settled down after revolutions north of the Sahara, the movements that sprung the Arab Spring have not been ignored south of the desert (or east of the Gobi desert, actually). This presented unique foreign policy challenges to China, which clung steadfastly to its policy of not getting drawn into the political conflicts in the countries it calls friends. Beijing's diplomats and corporate envoys simply waited for things to settle so business could resume. This might prove too little when increasingly own interests are at stake, for instance in the conflict between Sudan and South Sudan that affects oil exports to China. Increasingly, China's long standing foreign policy of non-interference is at odds with the shifting African political landscapes. In African states, several disputed or unpopular regimes are facing elections this year, including Zimbabwe and Kenya, while other resource rich regimes such as Equatorial Guinea, DRC, Nigeria and Angola have seen elevated levels of conflict already since the Year of the Rabbit began.

It would be speculation to predict which of these regimes will see out the Year of the Dragon unscathed, but two major events seem likely to impact on African relations with China in the year to come, and both are expected in the last quarter of 2012.

The first major change to expect is the designated end of terms of office for Hu Jintao

and Wen Jiabao, and the subsequent transition of power at the top of the Communist Party. Given the volatility of world affairs at present, and the increasingly weighty role China exerts in them, this planned change of hands at the wheel cannot be ignored. The money is on current Vice President Xi Jinping to ascend to leadership of the Party by March next year, aided by current Vice-Premier and Party Secretary, Li Keqiang, while the rest of the top party seats remain up for grabs, in terms of predicted successors. Economic forecasts predict that China can expect less than double digit economic expansion this year, and that pressure will come to bear as President Hu's and Premier Wen's successors assume the reins of power. All eyes are thus on the 18th Party Congress planned for October, that will elect the committee that will eventually, via establishment of the Politburo, put the new leaders in place to see out the Five-Year Plans laid out so carefully at Congress in 2011. The new leaders are not expected to stray too far from the party line where domestic or international political and economic considerations are concerned. Yet, in any regime, a change of power is sure to have unanticipated effects. A rising middle class in China increasingly expresses demands – and millions of still poor Chinese are living in deplorable conditions amongst the wealthy parts or in China's West. Despite the ongoing economic success: a lot remains to be done and conflicting demands need to be balanced within China; the giant is far from being as monolithic as it is often depicted in the news.

The second, directly Africa-related event, is the anticipated FOCAC V, the Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Co-operation, planned to be held in Beijing towards the end of the year. Hu Jintao arguably has earned the title “the African” during his Presidency. The first FOCAC was convened in Beijing in 2000 by previous President, Jiang Zemin, and this year sees the fifth such gathering take place right back where it started twelve years ago. Successive Ministerial Meetings have produced respectively more elaborate webs of agreement and understanding between China and the over three dozen African states that turn up for the event. Each year that passes sees more events and meetings organised under the various interest areas that FOCAC concerns itself with. Foreign Minister Yang already concluded his year opening annual whistle stop tour of African friends for 2012.

Furthermore, there are legal and socio-cultural forums, political and economic think tank meetings, trade agreements and educational exchanges. The depth and reciprocity of these links are to be further improved. As the final receipts are counted, China-Africa trade is expected to top US\$150 billion last year, a figure which may double by 2015, which places that trade dynamic well within the playing field of China's trade relations with America and Europe. In 2011, China was Africa's third-largest export market, behind Europe and the United States, and it trailed only Europe as a source of imports. And yet, the political and economic dynamic at FOCAC in Beijing this year may be quite a different challenge than those in the Ministerial Meetings previous.

Where the Rabbit dictated calm consolidation in increasingly volatile times, the Dragon is a more fraught year in the Chinese zodiac, portending great risks, but also valuable rewards. May we all have an auspicious year 2012. 