

Dear Reader,

Few organisations or institutions with an interest in the ever-evolving China-Africa interaction can afford to ignore the FOCAC, a now 12-years old institution begun in Beijing, whose principal event, a triennial ministerial meeting of heads of state and government officials from over forty African states and China, takes place in Beijing around the time of publication of this special edition of the *African East-Asian Affairs | The China Monitor*. The CCS, as the leading African research institution for innovative & policy relevant analysis of Sino-African relations, has gone to lengths to prepare several publications for this year's fifth ministerial meeting of the FOCAC, including three policy briefings, and several commentaries. This special edition of the *AEAA | The China Monitor* brings together some analysis of the dynamics around the FOCAC V in Beijing and complements our own work on this important date on the China-Africa calendar. Matthew McDonald appraises the proceedings of the FOCAC V meeting based on the Declaration and Action Plan published shortly after.

The three subsequent articles in this special edition offer different appraisals of the FOCAC platform. Huang Meibo and Qi Xie from Xiamen University in China give a categorical account of the commitments China has made to Africa since the inception of the forum, concluding that this is evidence of a co-operative, mutually beneficial relationship. Zhu Ming, from the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, while also portraying FOCAC in a positive light, highlights some of the "capacity gaps" which the Chinese side still faces. These include increasing the presence of Chinese NGO's in Africa and putting more effort into winning China's international media war against negative spin.

Writing from St. Andrews University in Scotland, noted China-Africa scholar Ian Taylor's critique of FOCAC is significantly different; rather than asking how the forum can be bettered, he questions its suitability in terms of the kinds of partnerships it purports to promote. Taylor argues that FOCAC commitments are largely dictated by China, making it more a spectacle in which Beijing bestows gifts of aid as opposed to a serious platform for "development-conscious participants".

The fault-line between Taylor and the other authors' work is indicative of a broader division between those who take FOCAC and its discourses of mutual benefit at face value and those who view it as an unequal economic and political relationship cloaked in the rhetoric of mutual reciprocity (and a rhetoric which many African elites are happy to embrace). But it also highlights two very different academic traditions: the Anglo-Saxon one, in which political ritual and its discourses are approached with caution, even suspicion; and the Chinese one, in which political events (particularly those involving the Chinese state) are, often through meticulous description, portrayed as in the interests of the general public good. In presenting these contrary views, this edition highlights the challenges FOCAC faces in terms of broad-based, transnational consensus building.

Yours sincerely,



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