

Original Paper

European Union (EU)-China-Africa Triangular Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative: The Way Forward

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Received: October 29, 2019 Accepted: November 7, 2019 Online Published: November 15, 2019

doi:10.22158/uspa.v2n4p226

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/uspa.v2n4p226>

Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers a platform for trans-regional cooperation, connects Asia and Europe with Africa, strengthens European Union (EU)-China-Africa triangular cooperation and provides development opportunities for the African countries. In the region of Africa, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is perceived as a mechanism for interregional dialogue with concrete results in the areas of peace, security, infrastructure, sustainable development and in assisting African states to achieve the SDG's. The trilateral cooperation is enriched by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for a deeper economic integration and for promoting regional security in Africa.

Keywords

Belt and Road, EU, China, Africa, trilateral cooperation, peace and growth

1. Introduction

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is included into China's diplomatic tools aimed at increasing China's role in global arena, boosting trade and promoting China's interests around the globe. The Belt and Road initiative presented by the Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013 aims at promoting, cooperating and strengthening connections between Asia, Africa, and Europe. The implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has a positive impact on EU-China-Africa triangular cooperation, based on win-win cooperation and aimed at fostering mutual benefits and understanding. In this paper, it is argued that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as China's strategic concept reinforces the trilateral axis China-European Union (EU)-Africa. It is intended to assess the leverage of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a multilateral platform for further development of European Union (EU)-China relations in Africa. China and European Union (EU) have shared interests in Africa's economic development and stability. China's security engagement is motivated by the need to protect growing economic interests on the

continent. This makes the European Union's and China's starting points closer than in 2008—when the triangular cooperation was first suggested.

It has been extensively reported that Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the Chinese approach of globalization focusing on mutual benefits among the countries involved in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). More specifically, at the 2017 Davos Economic Forum, Chinese President Xi called for more effective measures and structural reforms to establish equitable governance and to build new growth models in a multilateral system.

In the context of the trilateral cooperation, China leverages European experience in the Africa. EU has welcomed the Belt and Road Initiative and China's willingness to make a substantial contribution to the Juncker Plan (Note 1). The plan complements the Belt and Road Initiative and in this context China and the European Union (EU) can join efforts to help African development.

2. China's Engagement with Africa under Belt and Road Initiative

Approximately 46% of the world's supply of manganese and 50% of the world's cobalt reserves are preserved in Sub-Saharan countries. For instance, it is notable that 50% of the world's cobalt reserves are in the African continent (Note 2). Chinese investments are also interested in coltan resources which are being used for production of electronics (Note 3).

China invested \$72 billion in foreign direct investment in Africa between 2014 and 2018, followed by France (\$34.17 billion), the United States (\$30.85 billion), United Arab Emirates (\$25.27 billion) and the United Kingdom (\$17.68 billion). China also leads in creating a total of 137,028 jobs in Africa during the period, compared with 57,970 by France and 62,004 by the US.

China has prioritized the African region in its foreign policy. China has seen the great potential of African development based on its own economic development achieved over the past four decades.

With regard to *trade*, indeed China is Africa's biggest trading partner; it has surpassed countries such as the US and European countries. Therefore, there are serious concerns about trade imbalance with African countries since the majority of African countries have trade deficits with China, exporting minerals and buying Chinese manufactured goods. For trade balance in Sino-African trade relations, it would be beneficial for Africa manufacturing to remain in African countries rather than importing from China. With the increasing middle class in several African countries and the emerging consumer class, Chinese goods are becoming attractive. According to the IMF in 2012, China owned about 15% of sub-Saharan Africa's external debt. While in 2015, nearly two-thirds of new debt taken on by African countries was from Chinese loans (Note 4).

In the field of *investments*, there is an increase and diversification of Chinese investments in Sub Saharan countries (Note 5). Therefore, China is convinced that "Inadequate infrastructure is the biggest bottleneck to Africa's development", therefore, infrastructure and connectivity between urban and rural areas are being prioritized in the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (Note 6). Healthcare, education and sanitation infrastructure are also sectors that receive Chinese investments.

China's investments in urbanization are another sector of Chinese investments, such as buildings (the headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia), roads, railways, power plants and other infrastructure projects (Note 7). Chinese investments in urban development are welcomed by the African governments; The Chinese investments are attractive to African governments since China is not intervened in domestics' politics. However, there are several challenges such as inability of African companies to compete with Chinese companies which leads to the loss of local businesses and jobs and the non alignment of the buildings with the local context.

With regards to the Chinese *foreign aid*, China gives grants and loans with little or no interest which are flexible, and usually with no strings attached. China's approach relies on market based lending and concentrates on high-growth sectors such as infrastructure and mining. The conditions attached to China's aid challenge Western values of good governance, human rights, macro-economic stability and market-oriented reforms. Grants are used to help African countries build hospitals, schools and low-cost houses, and to support medium and small projects for social welfare. For instance, China's Exim Bank provides concessional loans supported by market capital. It helps recipient countries undertake projects aimed at generating economic and social benefits, as well as large and medium-sized infrastructure projects. It can also provide complete plant, mechanical and electrical products, technical services and other materials, including Special Economic Zones (SEZs) (Note 8). For instance, in Uganda China's grants tend to strengthen the relationship between the two countries building hospitals, government buildings and supporting various infrastructure projects hence the strengthening of China strengthens its political leverage in decision making.

3. European Union's Engagement with Africa

The European Union (EU) as a normative and civilian regional power provides a different growth model towards Africa underlying human rights, governance, accountability and civil law. The EU's development agenda is driven by security and migration concerns.

With regards to foreign aid, in the framework of the EU-ACP partnership, the European Union (EU) links aid and access to the EU's single market to cooperation in readmission programs for illegal migration and improvement in border controls. Dealing with the root causes of migration flows from Africa to Europe is a priority for the European Union. Supported by the EU External Investment Plan that promises up to €62 billion in private and public investments the EU trust fund provides additional financial resources. The success of the EU aid programs is highly depends on political stability, on good governance and the rule of law (Note 9). EU aid is based on grants and direct budgetary support, aims at poverty alleviation and targets soft sectors such as healthcare, education and governance.

4. European Union (EU)-China-Africa Trilateral Cooperation: The Way Forward

Chinese and EU aid programs have substantial differences; therefore, European Union (EU)-China-Africa trilateral cooperation is a multilateral response under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

More specifically, in the area of peace and security, European Union (EU), China and African Union (AU) coordinate support for peace-building missions, crisis prevention and post-conflict reconstruction under UN-mandate. Humanitarian cooperation is an opportunity for trilateral cooperation in practice.

Moreover, European Union (EU), China and African countries can work together on large infrastructure projects which link regional markets, such as roads, railways, ports, electricity and telecommunication networks as well as in the areas of agriculture and sustainable development.

The trilateral cooperation is pragmatic and allows African countries to strengthen relations with the European Union and China as well as to gain for the different growth model experiences of Europe and China. It is argued that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a multilateral platform that provides opportunities for China, European Union and Africa to cooperate in practice in a trilateral forum. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is in line with EU aid effectiveness agenda and in line with UN agenda for “silence guns” and the achievement of SDGs. Although Chinese engagement with Africa diverges from the EU’s engagement in several key regards there are also some areas of coordination between the two. This opens the door for strengthen trilateral; cooperation.

In terms of economic interests, both China and the European Union want to see a prosperous Africa, stable and open to international business. From both business and humanitarian perspectives, economic growth and poverty reduction are important shared goals. More although there is competition between European and Chinese firms over government contracts and access to resources, the larger goal of economic growth is common.

In security sector, China and European Union share common security interests in Africa (Note 10). Africa is strategically important to both China and the European Union and African countries play a key part in Belt and Road Initiative. It is therefore important for both China and the European Union (EU) to strengthen the capacity of African regional security bodies to react to a crisis. The Chinese and the Europeans make efforts to strengthen the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the organ of the African Union for conflict management and resolution.

The European Union (EU) continues strengthen the capacity of regional bodies for crisis response through financial, training and logistical support. However, despite similar positions towards the role of African regional bodies in conflict management, there is little or no cooperation or coordination between the European Union (EU) and China in this area, with both parties wanting their efforts to be seen as part of a wider interaction with Africa.

The European Union (EU) is a normative power that guides the African Union towards developing the capacity to respond to regional crises. China wishes to develop and long term policy in Africa. China is appeared to be an equal partner to Africa that protects the interests of developing nations. In this way,

China is intending to increase soft power in Africa. China has moved towards a flexible policy of interference, whereby China intervenes in the internal affairs of a state when such interventions have a UN mandate and threaten the sovereignty of a state.

Similarly, there is the need for both China and the European Union (EU) to focus on Africa's non-traditional security needs—for example, water and food security—to prevent further conflict on the continent. Both actors provide financial and technical support to African-led projects, such as the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program. The European Union (EU) and China made efforts for the capacity building of African states to respond to climate change, organized crime and water and food insecurity, through government aided bodies, NGO funding, state-owned enterprises or international organizations. However, with the African regional security bodies, cooperation between the European Union (EU) and China in non-traditional security is not efficient.

Europe can help Africa with its close historical, cultural and geographical ties to the continent; However, it is important for the European Union to accept diversity within global security governance. It is noted that Europe's colonial past is also a huge barrier to cooperation. The European Union should also consider allowing member states that do not have a history of colonial rule in Africa to take the lead in cooperating with China and Africa.

There is the need for African countries to ensure strong governance, rule of law and vibrant civil societies to obtain better conditions from Chinese counterparts. In this context, the African Union should make efforts to reinforce local frameworks for environmental protection, labor laws and transparency for obtaining benefits from all foreign investors.

5. Conclusions

The European Union (EU)-China-Africa trilateral cooperation has vital importance. Despite the differences in development aid models, there are many prospects for the European Union (EU) China and Africa to positively coordinate for economic growth and stability in the African continent. The European Union (EU) and China should have a continued dialogue and agreements for further coordination of their activities on the ground in African countries. There is a need for mutual understanding of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) activities in Africa. China has to reach out and coordinate with the European Union (EU) in major projects, to make development aid more effective, to increase efforts to achieve SDGs and sustainable development. Eventually, there is need for synergies with the African countries in order to be in line with African needs. In this context, it is necessary for both the European Union (EU) and China to recognize African Union's central role in summits with Africa. The Belt and Road Initiative has the potential to be a platform for institutionalization of the European Union-China-Africa trilateral cooperation with substantial upgrade of the status of the African Union as coherent regional and international actor.

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Notes

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