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Op-ed

CHINA IS AN IMPORTANT AFRICAN PARTNER

By Klaus Kotzé

It is recognised that China is an increasingly important partner of the continent. Many African states have recently established or developed their relations with China. While these relations have seen advances, including the increase in the volume of trade, China-Africa relations are not new and have deep historical significance. Both sides supported each other in their shift towards independence in the previous century. This initial support from independence has ensured that various African states have walked an extensive path with their Chinese compatriots, culminating in cooperation and partner contracts, principally through the Forum for China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), and often under the Belt and Road Initiative, China's flagship foreign policy programme.

At a recent Africa Consultative Meeting organised by the Inclusive Society Institute, one of the topics that came under scrutiny was Africa's relationship with China. In an attempt to find a synchronised African position, the participating think-tanks from across Africa came to a number of commonly agreed conclusions.

Africa must learn from China while remaining independent

The partnership between Africa and China offers tremendous opportunity for Africa's development at a time when its relations with traditional Western partners have come under strain. It is in the interests of African states to be ambitious. It is, therefore, in Africa's interest to look at what the Chinese have done to pursue development and eradicate poverty. Targets should be set, and programmes drawn up to ensure that goals are met.

While African states should draw from Chinese experience when it comes to industrialisation and development, this does not necessarily mean that African states are in China's 'camp'. Nor should they seek to copy the Chinese. Instead, on the similar basis as proclaimed by Pan-African Kwame Nkrumah, Africa should not look east or west, it should look forward as the African continent. From this approach African states must build friendships with all friendly states. They must develop regional and independent pathways that are fit for purpose.

Africans must ensure greater internal security and stability, so to spur further investment. Africans must take ownership of their affairs and not simply blame others. In this vein, China should not be blamed when African states cannot repay their debts.

The Africa-China partnership: Concerns of a Chinese bias

The meeting agreed that African states should not overly rely on any external parties. Relations should be balanced better. Africa must be more of a partner than a philanthropic beneficiary or customer. The relations between Africa and China, still appears to be biased towards China, thus not yet giving

full effect to the agreed notion of a mutually beneficial relationship between the two sides. More needs to be done to ensure African development, technology transfer and the buildup of expertise.

Political intelligence and commitment is required to address these biases. It is incumbent upon African leaders to have a thorough understanding of their own local realities, so as to raise the perceived imbalances with their Chinese counterparts.

It is encouraging that the Chinese are displaying tangible commitments to address imbalances. One such example, is the case of South Africa, where China has committed to increase bilateral trade by R100 billion. Another is the opening up of the Chinese market to more imports from Africa - and it is facilitating the competitiveness of African products through zero-rating import tariffs on a growing number of products from the continent.

Yet, it will be more valuable if that R 100 billion speaks to beneficiation and value addition.

The trade balance between China and Africa has long been in China's favour. African governments need therefore to do more to ensure greater balance. The continent must become more of a partner than a customer. Here African states must stand up to achieve their own industrial autonomy and overall independence.

Africa must uplift itself

To prevent over-reliance on any external party, African states must uplift themselves. While various concerns were heard about skewed relations with others, including China, it can be argued that it is primarily Africans who were letting Africa down.

More needs to be done by Africans to understand their own realities and the needs of the continent. Research and more programmatic studies are needed so to ensure that they know what it stands for and they need to empower themselves to pursue their own future with confidence. Greater knowledge of self will allow the continent to better develop its own strategies, as well as better perceive its worth.

A deeper, longitudinal understanding of partnerships, the structuring of loans and the effect of foreign investment will also allow greater balance in its relationships with external parties. Presently, Africa does not sufficiently know holistically where partners, including China, are investing and what effect it has on the continent. Greater knowledge will allow it to strategically partner with all sides and draw maximum benefit. With a growing population, Africa needs to invest in itself to bolster employment. By pursuing its own industrial autonomy, Africa will diversify and rely less on others.

Setting its own targets and strategies is important for Africa. In recent years, African states have sent strong signals that they need to extend its relationship beyond the West. This is a turning point that deserves reflection. They need to engage widely to ensure that relationships are not skewed at the expense of others given that it is in the continents interest to have productive relationship beyond the East/West divide.

Conclusion

Whilst Africa's partnership with China is central to its interests, the relationship must shift more rapidly from the current bias in China's favour, to the mutually-beneficial vision that the two sides share. To ensure mutual benefit, Africans must take ownership and better perceive and strategically

pursue their interests. They must engage in global fora from a calculated position that effectively pursues a consolidated continental strategy.

Dr Klaus Kotzé is the rapporteur for the Inclusive Society Institute's (ISI) International Policy Programme. This article draws from the report on the African Consultative Meeting which was organized by the ISI and held in Cape Town earlier this year.