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COVID-19 US-CHINA DISCORD AND ITS IMPACT ON SINO-SOUTH AFRICA AND SINO-AFRICAN RELATIONS

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in strained relations between the two largest global economies, the United States of America (US) and China. This discord requires countries who have longstanding and strategic relations with both these nations to carefully navigate their affairs, adopting foreign policy positions that would maintain and strengthen their interactions with both. This paper examines the effect that COVID-19 and these strained relations has had – and may still have – on South Africa’s and Africa’s foreign policy towards China. In reflecting on the tricky position in which the US-China discord is placing South Africa and many other countries on the continent, the paper comes to a few key conclusions. Firstly, the US’s withdrawal from the WHO is ill-considered, especially at a time when the global COVID-19 pandemic requires all nations to work together in solidarity to combat this disease. Secondly, based on the multitude of new cooperation commitments and aid packages extended from China to Africa during the pandemic, relations between the two are unlikely to be affected by the COVID-19-charged feud between China and the US. Thirdly, however, as the US too remains an integral partner to South Africa and Africa, this might see the African continent performing a difficult balancing act between the two feuding parties and their respective allies in the months and years to come.

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Upon writing this paper in early July 2020, more than 11 million people worldwide had contracted the COVID-19 virus, and more than 550 000 deaths had been linked to the disease (Deutsche Welle, 2020). The virus was first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan, where officials started reporting cases in December 2019 (WHO, 2020). Its genetic sequence was shared publicly between 11 and 12 January 2020. All indications are that it “has a natural animal origin and is not a manipulated or constructed virus” (WHO, 2020).

Nevertheless, accusations that the COVID-19 virus was created in a laboratory seem to persist. A study in Canada, for example, revealed that one in four Canadians believed there was at least some truth in the claim that the virus had emerged from a laboratory in Wuhan (Stecula, Pickup & Van der Linden, 2020). However, this notion appears to have been dispelled now that many researchers have studied the genomic features of the virus and have found no evidence of it being a laboratory construct. If it were, the genome sequence would have shown a mix of known and unknown features, which it does not (WHO, 2020).

Yet the United States of America (US) continues to insinuate that “COVID-19 originated in a Chinese biolab” (Ecarma, 2020). They also blame China for not being transparent when COVID-19 was first

detected, and for having tried to suppress the outbreak. At a news briefing in April 2020, the US secretary of state told reporters that his country believed that “Beijing had failed to report the outbreak in a timely manner, in breach of World Health Organisation rules” (Brunnstrom & Pamuk, 2020).

The notion of China having behaved inappropriately in respect of COVID-19, and of the World Health Organisation (WHO) somehow being an aider and abettor, continues to gain momentum in US rhetoric. By 8 July 2020, it had escalated to the point where the US officially started the process of withdrawing from the WHO (Cohen, Hansler, Atwood, et al., 2020).

How this growing discord between the US and China will affect other nations’ relations with China remains to be seen. Whether these tensions will sway or at least dampen enthusiasm to further strengthen ties with China is yet to be determined. That it could still have an impact cannot be ruled out, especially given the current US administration’s inclination to pressurise other nations to follow its lead. In 2018, for instance, the US threatened to cut funding to South Africa through its USAID programme when it emerged that South Africa had voted against their motion in the United Nations (UN) to declare Jerusalem the capital of Israel (Pather, 2018). USAID, through the United States President’s Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR), supports South Africa’s efforts to prevent and treat HIV/Aids and tuberculosis (USAID, n.d.). Granted, the aid was eventually not cut; in fact, South Africa received even more assistance in the form of a US grant of at least R410 million to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020 (Home, 2020). For now, therefore, South African relations with the US appear to be sound (US Department of State, 2020).

But how could the discord being sown by the US in relation to China and the COVID-19 pandemic affect Sino-South African and Sino-African relations, if at all?

Placing South Africa in a tricky position

The US is a key strategic partner to both South Africa and other African countries who share its values of democracy, the rule of law and good governance (DIRCO, 2020). It is also South Africa’s third-largest trading partner (South African Market Insights, n.d.). At the same time, South Africa’s strategic collaboration with China extends beyond bilateral interests, as the two nations have similar views on many global issues (DIRCO, 2020). In addition, China is South Africa’s largest trading partner (South African Market Insights, n.d.).

The South African position to date has been that, given the global gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US and China should engage in dialogue to address their concerns and resolve their issues in a peaceful and constructive manner. Convinced that the pandemic calls for a global inclusive solution, South Africa believes that the two global giants’ “focus should be on providing support and assistance to vulnerable countries” (DIRCO, 2020). As the world’s two largest economies, the US and China both have a responsibility to help restore the well-being of people across the globe by reviving the world economy, which has been devastated as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak (DIRCO, 2020).

Already, the US-China trade war poses threats to the South African and African economies. Whilst Africa is not a direct target of the conflict, the impact of the quarrel is affecting the continent. The imposition of US tariffs on Chinese products has caused commodity prices and local currencies to fall. Major stock exchanges across Africa have been badly hit, which has shaken investor confidence in the continent. Indeed, it is predicted that the resulting slowdown of the Chinese economy could “hinder the exports and government revenues of many economies across the African continent” (Cazares, n.d.).

The COVID-19/WHO spat adds another dimension to the threat that the uneasy US-China relationships holds for the African continent. Keep in mind that Africa is heavily dependent on WHO funding. The

continent receives “more than double the budget allocation of any of the five other regions the WHO administers globally”, of which approximately 60% goes towards reducing infectious diseases (Baker & Hincks, 2020). Against this backdrop, the US’s “decision [to cut funding to the WHO] could have its greatest impact on Africa’s ability to fight the pandemic since it is probably the region least equipped to fight it on its own” (Fabricius, 2020).

So, whilst South Africa has been measured in its response, this should not be mistaken for a lack of concern over the tensions between the US and China, especially during this period of global turmoil. Resolving US-China tensions is clearly in the global interest, particularly in so far as it affects Africa. In South Africa’s engagements in the multilateral arena, the country has emphasised the importance of the US and China bridging their differences. This it has done independently, and as chair of the African Union, as well as in the capacity of non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (DIRCO, 2020). Pointing to the US’s key role in the sustainability of the WHO and, therefore, in the prevention of future pandemics, South Africa has urged the US to reconsider its withdrawal from the WHO. Ultimately, the capacity of all global nations is required to help combat the deadly COVID-19 pandemic and similar future outbreaks (Lindeque, 2020).

Impact of COVID-19 US-China discord on South Africa’s and Africa’s willingness to deepen Sino-African relations

South Africa’s foreign policy is driven by five priorities. These are (i) strengthening cooperation within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), (ii) promoting the African Agenda, (iii) strengthening South-South cooperation, (iv) strengthening multilateralism, and (v) cooperating with strategic formations from the North. Its underpinning values are the promotion of global peace, development and economic prosperity (DIRCO, 2020). This is the policy and values system within which the country’s strategic partnership with China is positioned.

The South Africa–China partnership goes beyond narrow bilateral considerations, extending into the multilateral arena. The two nations have similar views on several global issues. The strategic partnership is guided by the respective partners’ shared aspiration to promote economic growth, development and mutually beneficial cooperation to help eradicate inequality, poverty and unemployment (DIRCO, 2020).

At a national level, South Africa considers its relationship with China an important vehicle to achieve the development goals articulated in its National Development Plan (NDP) (DIRCO, 2020), which was developed by the National Planning Commission in collaboration and consultation with South Africans from all walks of life (National Planning Commission, n.d.). To this end, South Africa pursues several agreed cooperation mechanisms with China that provide opportunities to exchange views, adopt best practice and deepen cooperation so as to create a better future for both countries’ peoples. These mechanisms include:

- a bi-national commission, which serves as a strategic platform to address issues of common interest between the two countries, such as trade promotions and economic exchanges (RSA, 2019);
- a joint working group, comprising cabinet ministers from both nations, who monitors the implementation of cooperative projects, and manages and solves challenges that arise during the implementation of those projects (Fahamu, 2014); and
- a strategic dialogue, which provides a platform for the regular review of the bilateral political and economic relations between the two countries (DIRCO, 2019).

As current chair of the African Union (RSA, 2020), South Africa understands the complexities and importance of China’s engagement with and on the African continent. China’s focus has been on economic development and the provision of crucial socio-economic infrastructure. It has also been

willing to invest in geographic areas that other international financial institutions, Western governments and companies have steered clear of to date (DIRCO, 2020).

As the largest trading partner of South Africa and the rest of the African continent, China plays a critical role in supporting economic diversification, beneficiation, human resource development and employment, as well as the expansion of the continent's manufacturing base. Its position as the global engine of economic growth has presented both the South African and African economies with significant growth opportunities (DIRCO, 2020).

In the context of COVID-19, this close cooperation was again demonstrated when South Africa and China cooperated closely on research and the exchange of medical supplies and expertise during China's initial outbreak of the coronavirus. During this period, South Africa made several donations of medical equipment to help China combat the virus (news24.com, 2020 & DIRCO, 2020). Similarly, China is now supporting South Africa and Africa by supplying them with much-needed medical equipment, training and information, and deploying medical research teams (Mekuto, 2020).

As to whether the COVID-19-charged discord between the US and China has had an adverse impact on Sino-South Africa and/or Sino-African relations, the answer seems to be in the negative. If anything, the sustained level of Chinese involvement on the African continent, whether COVID-19-related or not, has served to strengthen relationships. Attempts to weaken trust in China and its intentions do not measure up to the reality experienced by Africa's leaders.

Through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a dialogue platform that formalises Sino-African exchanges on various topics (King, 2019), China has pledged to continue supporting African countries in their fight against COVID-19. More so, it has pledged financial support, partly through the suspension of debt servicing and repayment. China has also undertaken to construct the African Centre for Disease Control. And through the Belt and Road Initiative, in which a number of African countries such as Egypt, Ethiopia and South Africa are taking part (Chatzky & McBride, 2020), greater cooperation with international organisations such as the UN and WHO is also on the agenda (Tembe, 2020).

Beyond COVID-19, China's President Xi Jinping has committed to support the development of the African Continental Free-Trade Area (ACFTA), which will aim to create a single continental market for goods and services, with free movement of businesspeople and investments (AU, n.d.). China will help enhance connectivity, strengthen industrial capacity and develop supply chains. In addition, it will explore broader cooperation with Africa in new areas, such as the digital economy, smart cities, clean energy and 5G mobile technology to boost the continent's development and revitalisation (Xi, 2020).

China also announced measures to support WHO efforts to establish a global humanitarian response depot, which will facilitate anti-epidemic supply chains and foster "green corridors" to fast-track transportation and customs clearance. It has undertaken to make available \$2 billion over the next two years to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in developing countries, many of which are in Africa. Through FOCAC, the construction of the China-Africa Friendship Hospitals and the pairing of Chinese and African hospitals were announced. China has also pledged to prioritise African countries once it has succeeded in developing a COVID-19 vaccine (Abumaria, 2020).

Clearly, therefore, many of the new economic developments, cooperation commitments and aid packages from China to Africa were announced, and indeed commenced, during the period of combatting the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, this has taken place notwithstanding the US-China discord. Thus, it is safe to conclude that despite the dissonance between the US and China, FOCAC will remain an important platform for Africa and China to jointly implement their cooperation initiatives (Xinhuanet, 2020). There is little evidence to suggest that this particular dispute between the world's two greatest economies is affecting Sino-African affairs.

Instead, the scenario sketched above not only suggests South Africa and Africa's willingness to deepen China-Africa relations in the current international environment and under present conditions; it also confirms a deep commitment on Africa's part to honour its partnership with China and work towards taking this relationship to even greater heights.

Conclusion

To ensure economic growth and development in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and effectively combat the disease at a global level, South Africa believes that the international community needs to sustain and strengthen cooperation at both bilateral and multilateral levels. Within this context, it considers China to be a proven and reliable partner to both itself and the African continent (Lotz, 2020). This in itself is bound to drive a deepening of relations between South Africa and Africa on the one hand, and China on the other. This is particularly so given that South Africa's foreign policy towards China is rooted in decades of solidarity and friendship.

Going forward, this will mean walking the tightrope between maintaining good relations with China and with the US. That tightrope might even become more treacherous if other countries follow the US's lead in ostracising China because of its handling of the coronavirus, which the United Kingdom lately seems inclined to do (Langfitt, 2020).

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