



Championing the right cause

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By Li Anshan (China Daily)

China, Africa must use gains from Forum to foster long-term relationships

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, which has entered its 12th year, is undoubtedly a role model for international and South-South cooperation. But what makes the forum different is its adherence to pragmatic cooperation principles and the focus on mutually beneficial mechanisms.

There is no doubt that the forum has played an important role in elevating the level of "strategic partnership" and relations between China and Africa. It has also played a key role in fostering economic, political, social and environmental ties.

At the same time there have also been several apprehensions about the forum, like the need for its existence and the people behind it. Some experts feel that the forum has been spearheaded by China, while others consider it as a part of China's geo-strategy in Africa. But there are also several other clear-cut reasons that explain the origins and the need for such a forum.

China-Africa relations have grown rapidly since the 1990s and so also the challenges and opportunities from economic globalization. There is now more than ever a need for a common platform to discuss these issues.

Policymakers in China have long realized the need for such a mechanism between the two sides and mooted several long-term partnership strategies. There has also been considerable interest from African leaders and officials for such a mechanism.

In January 1999, Ahmed Haggag, the former Egyptian ambassador to Kenya and the then assistant secretary-general of the Organisation of African Unity visited China to attend the opening ceremony of the African Art Exhibition in Beijing. Haggag put forward a proposal for the establishment of a multilateral cooperation mechanism between China and Africa, during his meetings with then Chinese vice-premier Li Lanqing and other senior officials. The Chinese side believed that multilateral cooperation was not easy to achieve and hence did not evince too much of interest in the proposal.

But with many Western nations stepping up their high-level foreign exchange mechanisms in Africa, it soon became essential for China also to take its ties with African nations to a different plane altogether.

In 1998, Tang Jiaxuan, the then foreign minister, visited five West African countries - Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin. Following the visit, Tang realized the growing importance of Africa in the international political and economic arena, and the need to strengthen China-Africa cooperation.

Things really started moving in 1999, when the then foreign minister of Madagascar Lila Honeta Ratfandrihamanana during an official visit to China indicated that many African nations had set up cooperation mechanisms with developed countries, such as the Franco-African Summit. With China-Africa relations steadily improving, she suggested a similar exchange between the two sides and need to work out the modalities for the effective functioning of such a mechanism. In many respects, the initial proposals and efforts from African nations paved the way for the setting up of the forum.

After 12 years, the China-Africa cooperation platform has now reached a concrete stage. Multilevel exchanges, bilateral interactions and decision-making processes between the two sides reflect the common goal of scientific cooperation.

Project selection under the aegis of the China-Africa Cooperation Forum has also veered more toward African interests. (The African side is permitted to float two or three alternative proposals depending on the need). The real core of China-Africa cooperation can be found in the Four Basic Principles, namely the principles of equal treatment, mutual support, autonomy and common development.

Though cooperation between the two sides has notched up many achievements, there are still defects and problems. Due to lack of experience in the initial stages, the forum is not perfect, and it has always been in a process of continuous learning, change and adaptation.

I call this imperfection "plight mechanism" as it makes it difficult for the forum to maximize its functions. The plight of such a mechanism comes from three aspects: the Chinese side, the African side and the interactions between China and Africa. Only if these shortcomings are overcome can the cooperation mechanism be further improved.

The forum should also be included in China's African strategy under the context of globalization and international strategy.

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