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The Global South in Times of Crisis: A China–Africa Relations View

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The human tragedy of Covid-19 and the predicted effects of the outbreak on the global economy are putting a strain on the very fabric of our societies. Other looming issues, such as climate change, contribute to a picture that is all but bleak, and which will require brave choices and strong international leadership. In the current crisis, developing countries are faced with additional challenges, including shortages of healthcare workers, lack of fiscal and monetary capacity, income losses, poor urban planning, and overpopulation. As people in most Global South countries are likely to suffer the impact of such crisis more than in the developed world, solidarity beyond borders is being invoked and South-South solidarity is increasingly called upon as a necessary means to achieve global development, even by leaders of multilateral organisations such as the World Bank. In the past, the idea of a Global South has proved a successful source of identity for developing countries, encapsulating the common experience of colonialism and imperialism, and it has been used as a mobilising strategy based upon a critique of the inequalities of the current international system. China's leadership often draws on this rhetoric to strengthen its own official discourse of a 'shared community with a common destiny'.

In the face of current struggles, can the Global South and the values it claims to represent offer reasons for hope? Are there any lessons learned? Crises such as the outbreak of Covid-19 urge us to move beyond what are too often empty slogans and make concrete progress. China-Africa relations, which have been at the centre of many recent debates around the pandemic, offer an example of the potential of South-South cooperation, as well as what doesn't work with it. Based on the events of the past few weeks, a few key issues have emerged as central to China-Africa relations and offer a glimpse on what the future of these ties holds: racism; the youth; social media & digital connectivity; debt; and narrative power.

Racism

While people of Asian ethnicity have been experiencing racism in the US and elsewhere, recent dramatic developments for the community of Africans living in Guangzhou has once again exposed the hardships of Africans in China. Videos and pictures were posted on various social media showing Africans being evicted from their apartments and forced to sleep on the streets of Guangzhou, marking a moment of great human suffering and one of the tensest moments in the history of China-Africa relations. The Chinese government acted quickly in trying to smooth relations with their African counterparts, though not everyone seems to be equally impressed with their apologies.

Accusations of racism towards Africans in China are not new. What is new is the unprecedented backlash from within the whole African community, amplified by the combined effect of the African youth denouncing racist practices on Twitter and other social media, and African leaders publicly calling out Chinese ambassadors in the continent. On April 29, Nigeria's House of Representatives passed a motion which, in addition to assisting Nigerians who want to return home from China, commits to checking the status of all Chinese immigrants in Nigeria as well as ascertaining the number of illegal and undocumented people and businesses.

We are yet to see whether these episodes will lead to any continent-wide change; but if the Global South is still to

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stand for solidarity among developing countries, this cannot be just another bump in the China-Africa ride. The relevant authorities in China need to enact punitive measures against discriminatory practices and ensure integration of Africans into local communities across China. Meanwhile, the extraordinary mobilization of state- and non-state voices in the past weeks is indeed encouraging.

The youth

As governments struggle to find responses to yet another global challenge, the last few weeks have shown the incredible power of the youth as a critical actor in difficult times. In China and Africa, more and more young people have mobilised both on common issues and in response to their governments' actions. In China, young people have been pushing back against the government and its efforts to hide initial missteps in handling the Covid-19 outbreak, and have utilized social media to organize collective donations, demonstrations in the streets, and calls for free speech. In Africa, young people have demonstrated that it is possible to find purpose even in these moments, and many have taken action in fighting the virus in their communities. Let us not forget that by 2050, Africa's young population will increase by nearly 50 percent, making Africa the continent with the largest number of young people.

The youth in China and Africa are in many ways very similar—largely unfamiliar with the poverty of the post-Communist Revolution period or the experience of colonialism, they are less hung up on past wrongs and more projected into an interconnected future. As they are exchanging and sharing opinions now more than ever, especially via the internet, they will play an important role in re-designing how China-Africa relations are experienced by people beyond the government elites and the Global South rhetoric. Calling for more freedom of expression and greater accountability of their leaders, young people can act as a force for positive change in turning the rhetoric of solidarity into practice.

Social media and digital connectivity

An important tool during the Covid-19 outbreak, social media is hard to ignore in any discussion of China-Africa relations these days. For one, as mentioned above, part of the reason why the incidents in Guangzhou got so much cover is because the entire internet was flooded by Tweets and blog posts denouncing mistreatments of black people in China. It has been suggested that these episodes reveal the mounting political power of social media in the continent. In a way, this was inevitable. Chinese diplomats themselves, many of whom took to Twitter late last year, have now turned to a more aggressive public diplomacy, which has been termed 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy, named after two famous action movies. The idea even received endorsement from the Chinese government outlet Global Times recently. Just as the Chinese government opens up to a stronger presence online in an effort to diversify their public diplomacy portfolio, they should expect more scrutiny, criticism, and even online activism, not only within China, but also in partner countries.

While providing a space for further exchanges, the digital sphere also brings about challenges of its own. As a response to the outbreak, Chinese technology companies have been eager to promote products such as health-tracking apps to a largely welcoming market such as Africa's. Similar services are also being promoted by Western companies, but the latter tend to be more attentive to issues of data and privacy protection. These developments, which add to previous debates in Europe and elsewhere over the use of 5G services supplied by the Chinese firm Huawei, suggest that caution will be needed in implementing digital policies in the continent.

The digital space thus opens up new avenues, as well as new risks. Leaders in both China and Africa should capitalize on this captivating combination of young people, activism and digital connectivity, as it holds great potential to set the tone for the future of the Global South.

Debt

In the face of the coronavirus crisis, African countries have asked for a waiver of all interest payments, estimated at USD 44 billion for this year, as well as a waiver of principal payments for fragile states. Because China today accounts for around 17 percent of African debt, many expected Beijing to comment on the issue. And while Beijing is

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considering a number of responses, it seems unlikely that loans will be written off.

Debt has been a constant issue in China-Africa relations, but it picked up steam in 2017, when China was accused of willingly luring developing countries in a ‘debt-trap’, by extending loans to governments to develop infrastructure projects in strategically located areas, only to claim state assets as collateral when countries failed to repay the debts. Since then, Western countries have become more critical about the impact of Chinese lending and the sustainability of foreign debt. While there are reasons for concern, research data shows a much more nuanced picture. China has not been entirely idle and has responded to this criticism, for instance, by proposing ‘swap deals’. Moving away from the ‘Angola model’, this financing practice involves an agreement where a government receives upfront funding for infrastructure connected to resources, while the resource development production license is granted to a private investor. This formula has the potential to stimulate more private sector money and spread the risk.

While it remains to be seen what the implications and consequences of these deals are, it is important to acknowledge how China’s approach to lending in Africa has evolved in response to changed needs and interests, as much as criticism. To be sure, China—and the West—can do more and all have been called to ‘be selfish’ and provide debt relief to Africa.

Narrative (power)

In order for the Global South and its promises of win-win cooperation to succeed, trust is also necessary. This trust should not be limited to the governmental and societal levels, but should be cultivated across states too. China is currently busy trying to reshape the narrative around its response to Covid-19, through, for instance, the above-mentioned ‘Wolf Warrior’ diplomacy and what some have called ‘mask diplomacy’. Their message, however, is not unanimously welcome. In fact, while reactions tend to be less positive in Western countries, there have been exceptions (most notably in Italy, where some politicians and parts of the general public celebrated China’s efforts. Italy was also the first G7 country to formally join the Belt and Road Initiative). This has exposed at once the power and fragility of official rhetoric and story-telling.

While there may be a dominant story of any given event or issue, that is never the only story. China-Africa relations are a good example of this multiplicity, as their entanglements have been described by different actors using a variety of terms—friendship, mutually beneficial, predatory, neo-colonialist, economically-driven, and so on. However, the reality of everyday life as a Chinese in Africa or an African in China, will always be more accurate than any propaganda narrative. It is not just with official rhetoric and story-telling that trust among states can be created. It is also, and perhaps most importantly, through these stories and their resonance with global audiences, that the Global South will be increasingly perceived as either a source of strength or a weakness.

Global South 2.0

These five themes have been at the centre of recent developments in China-Africa relations. Their resonance with global audiences underscores how important these are and how, together with other trends, they will shape China-Africa relations in the future. They also offer a point of departure for a broader reflection on the Global South as a whole. Developing countries have now an opportunity to provide the rest of the world with best practices of solidarity and generosity. A younger and more digitally connected population is among the positive signs pointing in this direction. In times of crises, reminding others of common struggles may serve the purpose of eliciting a sense of community, but both China and African governments should capitalise on these opportunities, and need to move from rhetoric to action. If left to grand yet empty words, the future of the Global South might not look as promising as that portrayed by those very grand words.

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