



SEMINAR REPORT

"India- Africa Relations and the China Angle"

Chair: Amb. Ashok K Kantha, Director, Institute of Chinese Studies

Speakers

Amb. Rajiv Bhatia

Prof. Renu Modi

Dr Veda Vaidyanathan

DATE: 06 April 2022

Venue: Zoom

The Wednesday Seminar held on 6 Apr 2022 had the theme, "India- Africa Relations and the China Angle". The discussion primarily dwelled upon India's policy making towards Africa in the light of Chinese interventions in the region.

The discussion was initiated and moderated by the Chair, Amb. Ashok K Kantha, Director of the Institute of Chinese Studies. An integral part of the seminar discussion was framed around Amb. Rajiv Bhatia's third book titled *India-Africa Relations: Changing Horizons* (Routledge 2022). The book gives an account of Indian engagement in the African continent and has a dedicated chapter on the Chinese influence in the region.

The Chair began his address by acknowledging the scholarly effort by the author and highlighted the landmark incidents mentioned in the book regarding the Sino-African interaction, starting from the Forum on China- Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 to the recent developments around the Belt-and-Road Initiative and the COVID vaccines. The Chair

then mentioned arising apprehensions around Chinese activities in Africa stemming from concerns over rising debt, doubts over utility, environmental, social sustainability, corruption allegations, concerns over Chinese geopolitical ambitions, and the fear of predatory commercial practices.

The recent disruptions around China's zero COVID policy and its impact on African students in China were also introduced to the gathering. Another recent change in the Chinese stance is a scaling down of heavy investment commitments favouring more environmentally and socially sustainable projects. This change was noted through the Chinese Head-of-State Xi Jinping's address at FOCAC 2021 at Dakar, Senegal.

Post the Chair's address, Amb. Rajiv Bhatia, a noted veteran diplomat, and the book's author began his presentation by revealing his motivations behind writing this book. He mentioned that his interest in Africa began in his college days, and the nature of his profession gave him relevant insights on the topic. The COVID disaster left him with enough time to complete the book. He then notes that throughout this book, especially the chapter concerning China, he has taken a nuanced approach to objectively studying Chinese engagement in Africa, evading the risk of being too condescending(anti-China) or too appreciative(Pro-China). According to the speaker, studying Chinese actions should be centred on formulating better policies in favour of India. The speaker then takes up the question of possible competition between India and China over engagement in Africa. He proceeds to clear the mist by stating that the diplomatic narratives of both sides deny the existence of competition. The speaker then explains that the Chinese denial is rooted in the fact that they are way ahead in trade, investments and economic participation. At the same time, the Indian denial of competition with China stems from emotive factors and the uniqueness of Indian relationships with Africa. The speaker, in clear words, denied the possibility of collaboration between Indian and Chinese influence in Africa, given the current circumstances, but cautioned India to not lose focus on Africa amidst other issues like the Galwan incident, COVID and the Ukraine crisis.

Post Amb. Bhatia's address, the Chair proceeded to give a summary of his comments and invited Prof. Renu Modi to take the discussion forward. Prof. Renu Modi began by applauding the scholarly rigor of Amb. Bhatia's book, and then proceeded to highlight the importance of Africa as a region. To back her point, she described the richness of Africa's natural resource reserves with its geographical vastness, diverse cultural mix, and demographic importance. She

highlighted the potential of Africa becoming a vast consumer market for emerging economies. She informs that Africa has 38 countries with substantially long coastlines making them potential trade centres. She also notes the lack of awareness about Africa among Indians through her anecdotal evidence.

Then Prof. Modi gives evidence of Africa's geopolitical importance by giving examples of engagement of the world with Africa. She highlights the 1st Forum of China- Africa Cooperation in 2000, India- Africa Summit in 2008, Turkey in Africa in 2008, the global narrative made by western media like BBC around the theme of "rising Africa", and the investments and engagement made by the Gulf countries, Malaysia and Indonesia. She describes that the primary motivations for engaging with Africa for these countries revolve around geopolitical, economical, and cultural interests. She also gave an example of the Tazara Railway project and how it impacted China's visibility in Africa. She also comments on the African view of China during the Sino-Soviet rivalry as being more anti-Soviet than pro-China. She contends that during the 1960-the 80s, when China was undertaking projects like Tazara, Indian policy was almost absent due to preoccupation with domestic issues, the 1962 war with China and other border disputes.

Commenting on India and China's transactional approach and contrasting it with the West's condition-laden value-based approach(with higher emphasis on democracy and human rights) she cites examples of Chinese support for Robert Mugabe during the notorious Operation Murambatsvina and to Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir of Sudan and Indian oil dealings with Sudan, noting that a non-conditional approach has an advantage in Africa. She argues that this reflects in the rising attention to the Beijing and New Delhi Consensus in contrast to the Washington Consensus. Explaining Indian and Chinese interaction with Africa, the speaker traced its roots to the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference and then explained that the Indian and the Chinese rhetoric revolve around a spirit of brotherhood and mutual interests, which other players are adopting.

Speaking on some recent developments, the speaker noted how there were reports of certain protests and opposition to some Chinese and Indian businesses and raised concerns. The speaker also cited a statement by Alpha O Konare, Ex-President of Mali, to highlight the aspiration of greater autonomy in terms of interaction African countries are seeking. Speaking on Chinese policy, using President Xi Jinping's address at the 8th Forum On China-Africa

Cooperation at Senegal, the speaker suggests a scaling down of Chinese infrastructural and financial commitments. She posits that China may go ahead with smaller projects, but it is not likely to commit to mega projects like the ones it previously did. The speaker hopes that the Chinese shift towards a greener economy in this decade will be a bonus for Africa, helping it move towards the fulfilment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as provide a space for Indian footprints in green small and medium enterprise sectors.

The speaker is hopeful for a future where China, India and the world will move towards greener industries that cut pollution. Countries will lay more emphasis on transparency and environmental sustainability. The Chair then briefly summarises Prof. Renu Modi's address, and Dr. Veda Vaidyanathan was invited to begin her address.

Dr. Veda Vaidyanathan began by acknowledging the scholarly eminence of the panel and credits Amb. Bhatia's book, especially the specific chapter discussing China, dissects the issue for better understanding. She then cites an article written by Jordan Link at the Centre for American Progress titled, "5 things US policymakers must understand about China- Africa Relations". The article is written in the context of American- Chinese competition but has messages for Indian policymaking.

Dr. Veda uses the article to create her constructs to guide the study of implications for Indian diplomacy in Africa, under the influence of Chinese interventions. Dr. Veda Vaidyanathan pointed out that a critical concern is Chinese resource expenditure on capacity building, skills training, and transfer. This domain for long has been India's forte through interventions like Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) since 1964 and Ministry of External Affairs (Indian) scholarship programs since 1949, making it more a matter of concern. Dr. Veda then gives anecdotal evidence of her studies in China, that many students in China in sectors like mining, infrastructure development, and agriculture belonged to African bureaucracy or were linked to African governments in some ways. She informs about the prevalence of training programs run in China or via Chinese faculty or Chinese-trained African faculty.

The second point of Indian concern, according to Dr. Veda, is the acceptance of China as a preferred development model in the African countries, as evident by the results of

Afro-Barometer Surveys. This development comes at the backdrop of the narrative in International Relations scholarship that nearly all incidents that legitimise or add morality to China's superpower aspirations are about their initiatives in Africa.

Dr. Veda then points out her third point of concern, which is the rising prioritisation of African regions in Chinese foreign policy activities. As evidenced by the fact that since 1991 every foreign minister in China has made their first new year visit to an African country. She also refers to a study by "Development Reimagined" that said that from 2009 to 2018, African leaders from 53 countries visited China 222 times, while China's top leaders have visited the African Continent 82 times.

Dr. Veda's fourth point of concern was built on the premise of the Indian Prime Minister's address in Uganda which outlined ten guiding principles of India. In contrast, Dr. Veda cites Chinese policy publications in 2006, 2015, and subsequently in 2021. She points out that Indian capacity-building initiatives that face competition from Chinese capacity-building programs need re-evaluation and rigorous impact assessment.

Her fifth point pertains to boosting research and support to think tanks studying Africa and China-Africa relations. Sharing anecdotal evidence from her experiences at the Peking University, she emphasised the level of academic resources and access Chinese researchers get to study foreign countries. The lack of such facilities in India is a significant point of concern.

The statements by the speakers were followed by a brief Questions and Answers Session to revisit the topic from different perspectives in the audience and re-clarify the concerns and queries raised by the viewers. The speakers were in consensus about the need for a greater exploration of the Indian- African relationship and the need to factor in the Chinese impact in those studies. The discussion outlined a timeline of the Indo-African engagement, its nature and comparison with the world and the way forward for policymaking in the field.

Report prepared by Apurv Raj, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

Disclaimer: The Wednesday Seminar at the ICS is a forum for presentations and discussions on current affairs as well as ongoing research by scholars, experts, diplomats, and journalists, among others. This report is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speaker(s) and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies