Africa-China Relations: Symmetry, Soft Power and South Africa

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Abstract

Africa-China relations have not reached an apogee but they have gathered steam. Two important issues within this are whether the relationship between the two parts of the world is symmetrical or asymmetrical and the exact role of soft power in this constellation. This paper takes positions on these arguments and proposes that prominent economies on the African continent such as South Africa have an important role to play in ensuring a symmetrical relationship in which Africa can also take part in a symmetrical cultural diplomacy with China, such as in the setting up of Mandela Institutes in China.

Introduction

Two important periods and events, one in distant political history—the travels of Admiral Zheng He of Yunnan in the Ming dynasty (in the 1400s) to Africa, the other a relatively recent political event—the Bandung Conference of 1955, are often evoked by Afro-Sinologists and Sino-Africanists to mark the beginnings of Africa-China relations. Whatever date is established as the real beginning, Africa-China relations have suddenly gathered steam within the last 10 years. The relationship has been marked by high-level travels by Chinese leaders to African

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