

FOCAC: RETOOLING THE AFRICA-CHINA RELATIONSHIP FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

The international systems of the twenty-first century are being adjusted to accommodate new stark realities. One such reality is the assertiveness of those countries spearheading the efforts to replace the vestigial bipolarity of the Cold War period with multipolarity. Those countries are demanding enhanced inclusivity in the running of the systems. One such country is China. China is using different strategies to align its foreign policy with the roles it is poised to play in the twenty-first century. For example, it has established the Confucius Institute (its own language and culture institute), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Belt and Road Initiative, China International Development Cooperation Agency, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS (in partnership with Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa). Specifically for Africa, it has established the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)---the platform it is using to coordinate its policy towards the continent. Established in 2000, this 'Africa + 1' forum has enabled China to firm its presence on the continent. For example, it now has diplomatic ties with all African countries, except Eswatini. Furthermore, it has become the continent's largest bilateral trading partner. FOCAC is a win-win mechanism in that while it has firmed China's presence in Africa, it has widened Africa's access to Chinese aid. The article, sourced with qualitative data, concludes that China's dwindling capacity for interest-free and low-interest loans will concomitantly nibble away at Africa's enthusiasm for FOCAC.

Keywords: Africa, China, 'Africa + 1', FOCAC

Introduction

There have been three world wars in the past 100 years---the First World War (1914-19), the Second World War (1939-45) and the Cold War (1945-1991). While the first two wars involved active belligerence on the battlefields, the third one was a smouldering war that threatened mankind with the risk of annihilation for nearly half-a-century. Each of these wars, whether hot or cold, have forced countries, particularly the major powers, to reprioritise their foreign policy goals. At the end the Second World War, Britain handed over the baton of world leadership to the United States, while the end of the Cold War has seen the episode of the fiercest challenge to America's leadership. China, a second-rate power during the Cold War, is one of the powers challenging America's world leadership. So fierce is her challenge that some observers have described the present century as 'China's century'. One such observer, Jim Rogers, a wealthy investor who for years has been encouraging his daughter and other children to learn and practice Chinese, because, in his opinion, the United States is on the decline and the future belongs to China. He said, "If the 19th century belonged to Great Britain, the 20th century belonged to the United States, then the 21st century will belong to China. My advice: make sure your kids learn Chinese" (Stone, 2017).

China was, to all intents and purposes, excluded from the international systems during most of the about half-a-century of the Cold War. For example, it was excluded from UN until 1971 and from WTO until 2001. Its fortune started changing with the economic reforms implemented by Deng Xiaoping in the eighties. The major resistance to its "peaceful rise" has, so far, come from the Trans-Atlantic Alliance. It is the world's second-largest economy by nominal GDP ("Top 10 largest economies," 2025) but the first when measured by purchasing power parity ("The World Factbook," n.d.). Since the end of the Cold War, it has been using different soft power strategies to either build new relationships or retool those ones built during the Cold War. Africa is one of the regions it has reengaged since the beginning of the 21st century. So ubiquitous has its presence on the continent become that Howard W. French has called the continent 'China's Second Continent'. The magnitude of its reengagement with the continent is proxied with the following few statistics. Firstly, it has been the continent's biggest bilateral trading partner since 2009 ("China remains," 2024). Secondly, since 1991, every Chinese foreign minister's first overseas trip of the year has been to Africa (Vines, Tugendhat & van Rij, 2024). Thirdly, it is the continent's largest bilateral lender (Miriri, 2024). (Egypt became the first African country to receive aid from China in 1956 (Bräutigam, 2010)). Fourthly, it has written off billions of the continent's debts. Fifthly, it has expanded its peace and security footprint on the continent ("China expands," 2018). Sixthly, it has established a naval base on the continent (Vines, Tugendhat & van Rij, 2024). Seventhly, it has built a conference centre for AU ("AUC and China," 2011). Eighthly, it has awarded over 80,000

scholarships to Africans (AI-generated). Ninthly, it has had a permanent mission to AU since 2015 (“China announces,” 2015). Lastly, it has consistently provided medical assistance to the continent (Xiangcheng & Tao, 2014).

This paper takes a cursory look at FOCAC (the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) ---the platform through which it has coordinated its multifaceted relationship with the continent since the start of the 21st century.

What is FOCAC?

Since the end of the Cold War, Africa’s interaction with most major powers have largely been coordinated through the so-called “Africa + 1” or “One-plus-Africa” diplomacy. President Ruto of Kenya has described the arrangement as condescending: “We (some African leaders) have decided that it is not intelligent to go and sit before one gentleman from another place... and sometimes we are mistreated. We are loaded into buses like school kids” (Usman, 2023). The “Africa + 1” platforms so far are:

S/N	Forum	Inception Year	Frequency
1	France-Africa Summit	1973	irregular
2	TICAD (hosted by Japan)	1993	3 years (5 years before 2016)
3	EU-AU Summit	2000 (3-4 April)	irregular
4	FOCAC	2000 (10-12 October)	3 years
5	India-Africa Summit Forum	2008 (4-8 April)	3 years
6	Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit	2008 (18-20 April)	irregular
7	US-Africa Leaders Summit	2014	irregular
8	Italy-Africa Summit	2016	irregular
9	Indonesia-Africa Forum	2018	2018; 2024
10	Russia-Africa Summit	2019	2019; 2023
11	UK-Africa Investment Summit	2020	irregular
12	South Korea-Africa Summit	2024	-

According to Soule (2021), “Africa + 1” summity is often analyzed through the lens of geopolitical rivalry between traditional and new powers reflecting what the *Economist* called a “new scramble for Africa.”” The platforms, which are unthinkable during the Cold War, are divisible into two categories---those established by erstwhile colonial powers and those established by those with no colonial baggage. The platforms are being used in the neocolonialist rivalry on the continent. African leaders’ high attendance rate may not be unconnected to the large financial commitments associated with the summits, as well as African leaders’ desire to diversify their economic relationships and list of external partners as key priorities of their national development strategies (Soule). With regard to FOCAC, the major incentive is arguably China’s aid-without-strings policy.

FOCAC, has been the linchpin of China’s relationship with Africa since the end of the Cold War. No wonder UNDP has defined it as “the most comprehensive platform that promotes the China-Africa relationship” (“FOCAC,” 2016). It exists “to promote traditional China-Africa friendship and cooperation” (“Speech at 2006,” 2009). It is the only ‘Africa + 1’ forum established at the request of African leaders themselves (Deng, 2011). According to Mboya (2024), it “has been more focused on Africa’s concerted efforts to try to shift from unbalanced, colonial-style economic relationships towards those formed by equals.” A catalyst for South-South cooperation (Wen, 2009), it started with the maiden Ministerial Conference held in Beijing from 10 to 12 October 2000 and is held every three years, with venue alternating between Africa and China. Its two key meetings are the Ministerial Conference (held since 2000) and the Summit (held since 2006). The meetings are also attended by international organisations and development partners.

Institutionalisation of Africa-China Interaction

FOCAC, a “partnership platform” (“Why strong,” 2024), is the institutionalisation of the relationship that started between Africa and China 70 years ago at the Bandung Conference. That historic conference afforded Africa and China their first opportunity of formal interaction. Adjudged the watershed in the evolution of China’s diplomacy on the continent (Ogunsawo, 1974), the conference laid the foundations for modern Africa-China relations. About a year following the conference, Egypt, from which China had offered to buy cotton during the Zhou-Nasser meeting on the

sidelines of the Bandung Conference (Jansen, 1966), on 30 May 1956 became the first African country to establish diplomatic ties with China (“Chronology of,” 2014). From Egypt, China began its diplomatic inroad into the continent. From 14 December 1963 to 4 February 1964, Premier-cum-Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai visited 10 African countries: the United Arab Republic (now Egypt), Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia (“A friend,” 2021). On 25 October 1971, Africa contributed 26 of the 76 votes that returned China to the United Nations (Marsh, 2018).

The plan to institutionalise China’s interaction with Africa started with former President Jiang Zemin’s visit to 6 African countries in May 1996. That visit “recast and refocused China’s Africa policy following a long and sometimes contradictory period of political engagement with the continent” (Shelton & Paruk, 2008). During the visit, President Jiang proclaimed these five principles “concerning the development of a long-term stable and all-round cooperative relationship between China and the African countries oriented towards the 21st century”: (1). Being sincere, friendly, and mutually reliable and becoming all-weather friends; (2). Equality, mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty, and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs; (3). Seeking common development and mutual benefits; (4). Strengthening consultations and forming close cooperation in international affairs; (5). Looking toward the future and creating a more beautiful world (“Chinese leaders,” 2003). Prior to the launch of the forum, there was no platform for formal interaction between China and Africa as a bloc. What obtained was one-to-one relationship between individual countries and China. Initially a loosely organised structure, it has grown into a flexible but more strategic mechanism that can impact the China-Africa relationships and South-South cooperation (Li et al. n.d.).

African countries that have joined FOCAC espouse the ‘One China’ policy that requires diplomatic ties with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) rather than the Republic of China (Taiwan). The corollary of this requirement is that they support the assertion that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China. All African countries, with the exception of Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) which still diplomatically recognises Taiwan, are members of the forum. Non-membership of the forum, however, does not preclude economic exchange between the two countries, as evidenced by the fact that, apart from trade, the Chinese are building infrastructural projects in Taiwan’s “lone partner” on the continent. According to Tiezzi (2024), Eswatini has not yet ditched Taiwan because of “personalized diplomacy” with its absolute monarch, Mswati III. The 4 accession members are: Malawi (2007), Gambia (2013), Sao Tome and Principe (2016) and Burkina Faso (2018).

The following sub-forums have been established to enhance the efficiency of the forum: the China-Africa People’s Forum, China-Africa Young Leaders Forum, Ministerial Forum on China-Africa Health Cooperation, Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation, China-Africa Poverty Reduction and Development Conference, FOCAC-Legal Forum, Forum on China-Africa Local Government Cooperation, and China-Africa Think Tanks Forum.

Structure and Organisation

FOCAC

does not have a secretariat but two coordinating organs, namely the Ministerial Conference (annual) and the Summit (triennial). Its meetings are co-chaired: the Summit by the Chinese President and Chair of AU; the Ministerial Conference by the Chinese Foreign Minister and the foreign minister of the African country hosting the meeting or, where the meeting is held in China, the foreign minister of the African country that hosted the previous edition or the foreign minister of the African country that will host the next edition.

The first ministerial conference, at which the forum was launched, took place in Beijing from 10 to 12 October 2000 and was attended by Presidents Jiang Zemin (China), Gnassingbé Eyadéma (Togo), Abdelaziz Bouteflika (Algeria), Frederick Chiluba (Zambia) and Benjamin Mkapa (Tanzania), Premier Zhu Rongji, Vice President Hu Jintao, Salim Ahmed Salim (Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity), more than eighty-eight ministers from China and forty-four African countries, seventeen regional and international organisations, as well as business communities from China and Africa (“The first Ministerial,” 2000). The 4 African leaders represented the continent’s 4 regions---West Africa, North Africa, Southern Africa and East /Central Africa. President Jiang in his opening speech described the conference as “the first of its kind in the history of Sino-African relationship” and called for a new world order where all countries will have the right to participate in international affairs on an equal footing (“Chronology of,” 2014). He also mentioned that strengthening co-operation and promoting common development “will undoubtedly exert a far-reaching important impact on the cross-century development of Sino-African relations, closer South-South co-operation and the establishment of an equitable and just new international political and economic order.” So far,

the ministerial conference has been held 9 times, while the summit has been held 4 times---thrice in China (Beijing in 2006, 2018 and 2024) and once in Africa (Johannesburg in 2015). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 meeting was held virtually in Beijing and Dakar. African attendees participated from Dakar.

FOCAC meetings have become where China announces its aid to Africa.

Year	Type	No. of African leaders attending	Venue	Announcements
2000	Ministerial Conference*	4	Beijing	Beijing Declaration of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation and the Programme for China–Africa Cooperation in Economic and Social Development
2003	Ministerial Conference	6	Addis Ababa	Zero-tariff to some commodities of African LDCs
2006	Summit	35	Beijing	\$5bn concessionary loan; launch of China–Africa Development Bank (CADF) with initial \$1bn capital expected to grow to \$5bn; launch of Agricultural Technology Demonstrations Centers
2009	Ministerial Conference	49	Sharm el-Sheikh	\$11 bn loan announced; debt cancellation for some poorest countries; 100 new clean-energy projects; 50 China–Africa friendship schools; scholarships to be increased to 5500 by 2012; RMB500m in medical aid; 20000 professionals to be trained; 100 African postdoctoral fellows to conduct scientific research in China; agricultural technology demonstration centers built by China to be increased to 20; 50 Chinese agricultural technology teams to be sent to Africa; 2000 agricultural technology personnel to be trained
2012	Ministerial Conference	6	Beijing	Launch of Initiative on China–Africa Partnership for Peace and Security; CADF capital to be increased to \$5bn;
2015	Summit	43	Johannesburg	\$60 bn aid package; Access to Satellite TV for 10,000 African Villages programme
2018	Summit	50	Beijing	FOCAC formally integrated into BRI; \$60 bn development fund announced; RMB 400 emergency food aid to South Sudan announced
2021	Virtual	1	Dakar	China–Africa Cooperation Vision 2035; \$40 bn in trade finance, investment, loan and IMF SDR allocation; Debt cancellation for African LDCs, except Eswatini of debt incurred in the form of interest-free Chinese government loans due by the end of 2021
2024	Summit	53	Beijing	RMB 360 bn (\$50.70bn) in financial assistance for Ten Partnership Actions; strategic partnership with all 53 members

*The Ministerial Conference is regularly held every 3 years, including in those years the Summit is held. In Summit years, the Conference is held a day or two prior to the Summit.

So Far; How Far?

For the first time since the Atlantic Slave Trade, the West's centuries-old hegemonic influence in Africa is being challenged in earnest. China is leading the challenge. Courtesy of FOCAC, the vehicular platform of its post-Cold War relationship with the continent, it has deepened its presence on the continent in many ways.

Firstly, it has provided the continent with its most reliable alternative source of development assistance. For example, it has provided about \$170.08 bn of infrastructure loans to the continent (Oyintarelado et al., 2024). The chunk of the loans is low-interest or even interest free. Its economic assistance to the continent has mostly financed infrastructure projects---airports, seaports, roads, railways, hospitals, bridges, refineries, FTZs, etc. After all, the forum has been part of the Belt and Road Initiative since the 2018.

Secondly, trade with the continent during the past 25 years of the platform's inception have increased tremendously: 2000 (\$10.6bn), 2005 (\$40 bn), 2010 (\$114.81 bn), 2015 (\$300 bn), 2020 (\$176 bn) and 2024 (\$282 bn). It is the continent's biggest bilateral trading partner ("China remains," 2024), controlling 20% of the continent's exports and 16% of imports ("Why strong," 2024).

Support for the "One China" policy, concretised with exchange of ambassadors, is the only prerequisite for FOCAC membership. This precondition makes FOCAC the only 'Africa + 1' forum with a membership requirement. The benefits of this forum's membership are so inviting that no African country will want to be an outsider. This is arguably the reason why all Taiwan's remaining 5 diplomatic partners, with the exception of Eswatini, have switched from Taipei to Beijing since the inception of the forum. (There are reasons to believe Eswatini will ditch Taipei before long).

Conclusion

The Africa-China relationship has deepened during the first quarter of the present century, arguably as a result of FOCAC. There is no gainsaying this 'Africa + 1' platform has brought the continent and the country closer together. Both have benefitted from it. For Africa, the most visible evidence is the Chinese-financed infrastructural projects that now dot the continent. In fact, China has become a major source of development assistance for the continent. For China (which has become a respectable participant in the 'new scramble' for the continent), this 'Africa + 1' platform has enabled it to firm its foothold in Africa. It will be very difficult to argue that China would be able to make the great progress it has made in the different aspects of its relationship with the continent in the last 25 years without this platform. It has been the continent's largest bilateral trading partner for 15 consecutive years; and its long-wished diplomatic annihilation of Taiwan has all but been completed.

On the debit side, FOCAC, like all the other 'Africa + 1' forums, is not popular among Africans who regard them as one of the instruments of the 'New Scramble for Africa'. For it, this dim view is not the only major challenge: there is also the perceptual challenge of the characterisation of China's foreign policy as being too laissez-faire and far less moralistic and prescriptive than the West's. There is also the concern, fuelled by slowing economy, about China's continued ability to fulfil most of the commitments made under FOCAC. To illustrate, RMB 360bn (\$50.70), the amount pledged in 2024, was \$10bn less than the amounts pledged in 2015 and in 2018 respectively. There is no doubt that, as China's ability to dole out interest-free and low-interest loans diminishes, African leaders' enthusiasm for FOCAC will drop away.

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