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In the years leading up to 2000, Africa faced numerous challenges, including civil wars, diseases, and a crippling debt burden. The continent, often labeled as "hopeless," became increasingly unattractive to its traditional partners. Amidst this backdrop, China emerged as a reliable partner, stepping in when Africa needed support the most.

In 2000, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established as a triennial platform for high-level political coordination, marking the beginning of a new era. Through FOCAC, China solidified its role as a preferred partner for Africa, fostering dialogue and collaboration between China and African nations.

FOCAC has been held successfully eight times since its inception, with the last edition held in 2021 in Dakar, Senegal.

As the forum is scheduled to convene every three years, 2024 stands as a significant year, with the 9th FOCAC meeting set to be hosted in Beijing. Over its two-decade existence, FOCAC has evolved to ensure it remains relevant in deepening the ties between Africa and China.

Key Insights and Implications

The partnership between Africa and China is based on mutual respect, equality, and win-win cooperation. FOCAC provides a meeting point for African countries and China to exchange ideas, make agreements, and develop strategies to strengthen economic cooperation and enhance Africa's sustainable development.

Central to FOCAC's operations are the triennial ministerial conferences and summit meetings, alternately hosted by China and African countries. These gatherings serve as platforms for high-level discussions, policy coordination, and the formulation of cooperation frameworks. Notably, FOCAC emphasizes pragmatic cooperation through initiatives like the China-Africa Development Fund, the China-Africa Industrial Capacity Cooperation Fund, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to facilitate infrastructure development, industrialization, and sustainable growth across Africa.

Loan Commitments

China's increasing loan commitments under FOCAC offer significant advantages for Africa, primarily by addressing the continent's substantial infrastructure deficit and fostering economic development.

These loans provide critical funding for large-scale projects such as roads, railways, ports, and power plants. This financial support not only accelerates industrialization and enhances connectivity within Africa but also stimulates job creation and skills development. By facilitating improved infrastructure, China's loans help integrate African economies, boost trade, and attract further investment, thereby contributing to long-term sustainable growth across the continent.

China's loan commitment through FOCAC increased significantly over the years:

- 2006: \$5 billion – FOCAC III, Beijing, China
- 2009: \$10 billion – FOCAC IV, Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt
- 2012: \$20 billion – FOCAC V, Beijing, China
- 2015: \$35 billion – FOCAC VI, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 2018: \$60 billion – FOCAC VII, Beijing, China

Win-Win Cooperation

Several misconceptions suggest that African countries play a passive role in Sino-African relations. However, FOCAC itself is a testament to China's commitment to listening to Africa's needs and responding appropriately.

Structured to ensure African voices are heard, FOCAC's agenda is shaped by mutual interests and priorities. Regular high-level meetings, ministerial conferences, and consultations provide a platform for African leaders to articulate their developmental goals, with China tailoring its support accordingly.

This collaborative approach demonstrates respect for Africa's agency and a shared vision for sustainable development, challenging the narrative of unilateral influence and highlighting the proactive role African nations play in shaping their partnership with China.

FOCAC has solidified diplomatic relationships between China and African countries, creating a platform for regular high-level dialogue. It fosters strategic partnerships, allowing both sides to align their interests and collaborate on international platforms.

Economic Development

FOCAC has significantly influenced the trade and investment landscape between China and Africa. Trade volumes have increased, with China emerging as Africa's largest trading partner. Chinese investments span diverse sectors including infrastructure, energy, telecommunications, and manufacturing, contributing to Africa's socio-economic development.

- **Infrastructure Development:** China has invested heavily in African infrastructure, including roads, railways, ports, and energy projects. In 2018, China and Africa signed a \$60 billion cooperative plan to support infrastructure development. These projects enhance connectivity and economic potential.
- **Agriculture:** Since 2006, FOCAC has identified agriculture as a cooperation area. China has invested over \$100 billion in Africa's agriculture sector, leading to the training of farmers, promotion of modernized farming techniques, and construction of agri-processing factories, thereby increasing food production and reducing malnutrition. In 2009 FOCAC, China announced it would set up 30 agricultural demonstration centers across Africa in partnership with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization as well.
- **Health:** Improving health in Africa is a top priority for FOCAC. China's medical assistance, which has increased significantly since 1963, includes improving health infrastructure, conducting medical research, and providing assistance during outbreaks.

The COVID-19 pandemic also centered health cooperation as a key focus. China supplied nearly 200 million doses of vaccination to Africa and pledged to deliver an additional 1 billion vaccine doses, aiming for a 60% vaccination rate during the outbreak of the virus and over 100 million Africans have benefited from this support.

- **Trade:** Trade cooperation has been one of the propeller of China-Africa relations as China has remained Africa's largest trading partner for 15 consecutive years, with bilateral trade reaching a record \$282.1 billion in 2023.

In 2019, China announced plans to increase market access for African products and services, providing tariff exemptions for specific products as well as grant zero-tariff treatment to exports from least developed countries in Africa reflecting the growing economic interdependence between the two regions.

Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges

Beyond economic cooperation, FOCAC emphasizes cultural exchanges and people-to-people interactions. Educational scholarships, cultural exchange programs, and youth initiatives foster greater understanding and mutual respect between Chinese and African societies. By promoting cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, FOCAC aims to forge lasting bonds between the peoples of China and Africa.

Environmental Sustainability

FOCAC includes commitments to sustainable development, supporting renewable energy projects and environmental conservation efforts. Both China and Africa use the platform to address climate change issues, aiming for sustainable and eco-friendly development practices. During FOCAC, Africa and China discussed ways to enhance cooperation on green development through initiatives like the China-Africa Environment Cooperation Center.

They committed to supporting climate change projects, advancing the China-Africa Green Programs, and organizing roundtables and capacity-building training. Both sides aim to push forward the China-Africa Green Innovation Program and foster collaboration on green, circular, and low-carbon technologies.

These efforts are designed to boost Africa's capacity to achieve the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the AU Agenda 2063. Initiatives under FOCAC align with global development agendas, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), promoting shared progress.

Technological and Digital Advancements

FOCAC promotes the development of the digital economy in Africa, facilitating technology transfer and investment in digital infrastructure. It encourages collaborations in science and technology, driving innovation and modernization in African economies.

China's commitment to technological and digital advancements under FOCAC presents a significant opportunity for Africa's development. This partnership aims to bridge the digital divide by enhancing Africa's technological infrastructure and capabilities. Initiatives include the construction of advanced telecommunications networks, the establishment of technology transfer hubs, and the provision of training programs to build digital skills among the African workforce.

By fostering innovation and supporting the growth of digital economies, China's efforts help African nations leapfrog traditional development stages and integrate more effectively into the global digital economy.

In conclusion, the impact of FOCAC extends beyond bilateral relations. It focuses on long-term sustainable development, ensuring that cooperation benefits both China and Africa in a balanced and mutually advantageous manner.

It continually evolves to address emerging issues and adapt to changing global contexts, ensuring its relevance and effectiveness.

As the 9th FOCAC meeting approaches in some few months, the forum's continued evolution and adaptability will be crucial in addressing emerging challenges and ensuring its ongoing relevance and effectiveness in strengthening the partnership between China and Africa.

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