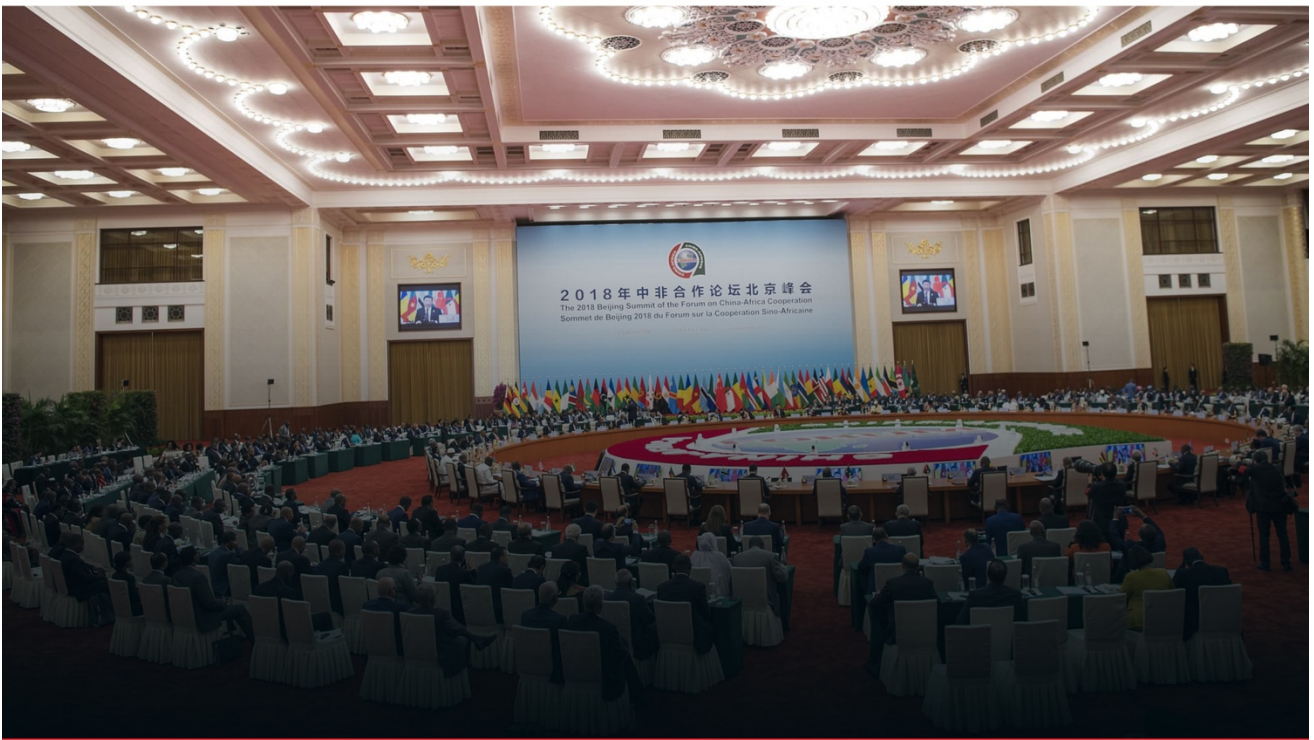




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FOCAC at a Crossroads? A Balanced Perspective



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For the past 24 years, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) has helped expand and strengthen China-Africa diplomatic and economic relations to an unprecedented level. At the same time, it has also faced criticism for its approach and impact.

This article examines these issues and provides a balanced view of what FOCAC means to China and Africa. It shows how the impact of FOCAC is complex, balancing significant successes and notable criticisms. While FOCAC has strengthened China-Africa relations through extensive trade, investment, and infrastructure development, it faces criticism for allegedly prioritizing China's interests, lacking transparency, contributing to unsustainable debt in African countries, and other pertinent criticisms. Addressing these concerns is critical to upholding a strong FOCAC.

Moving forward, there is a need for a nuanced understanding and constructive engagement with FOCAC's initiatives, focusing on enhancing transparency, promoting equitable partnerships that respect African agency, and addressing critical debt and environmental concerns.

FOCAC: Overview and its Impact

FOCAC stands as the most comprehensive platform promoting the China-Africa relationship, having been instituted in October 2000 to facilitate collective dialogue and practical cooperation between China and African countries. As outlined in [the maiden declaration treaty](#), the forum aims to promote collective dialogue, equality, mutual benefit, peace and development between China and African countries. Since the inaugural meeting in 2000, there have been eight FOCAC meetings or summits, with the ninth edition scheduled for September 2024 in Beijing. These meetings occur every three years, alternating between China and Africa.

Comparatively, [many Africa+1 forums or summits](#) have been organized over the past two decades, but FOCAC stands out as the most consistent, popular, and impactful. It has become the leading diplomatic framework surpassing all other Africa+1 summits. FOCAC thus represents a significant shift in China's foreign policy, demonstrating more flexibility and innovation since the 1960s. It has significantly shaped the China-Africa political and diplomatic relations highlighting the broader changes brought about by China's Opening-Up policy of the late 1970s.

FOCAC has also profoundly influenced trade and investment between China and Africa. China has been Africa's largest trading partner for [15 consecutive years, with bilateral trade reaching a record of US\\$282.1 billion as of 2023](#). Chinese investments cover various sectors, including manufacturing, agriculture, energy, telecommunications, and science and technology, contributing significantly to Africa's socio-economic development. FOCAC has also driven significant advancements in infrastructure across Africa. China has heavily invested in roads, railways, ports, and energy projects, enhancing connectivity and economic potential.

For instance, at the 2015 and 2018 FOCAC summits, China [pledged US\\$60 billion in financial support](#) for various initiatives, including infrastructure development across Africa. These efforts have strengthened political and diplomatic relations between China and African nations and fostered global cooperation and dialogue.

Criticism and Controversies of FOCAC

Despite the positive impact of FOCAC on both African countries and China, criticisms have emerged. The framework has been criticised for primarily serving China's interests and as a tool for 'debt-trap' where African countries face unsustainable debt from Chinese loans.

Moreover, transparency issues abound, with many agreements kept secret, leading to concerns about governance and accountability. Furthermore, worries persist about weakening African agencies and the environmental impact of Chinese investments on local ecosystems. These concerns are explored in turn below.

- The foremost criticism of FOCAC is that it primarily serves China's interests, acting as a tool for China to manipulate its foreign policy in Africa. In other words, many see the forum as a 'Sinocentric' initiative where China, the dominant player, uses the forum to push its interests in Africa. However, Chinese diplomats and [scholars alike counter that FOCAC was proposed by African leaders](#) who wanted to create a multi-partnership platform for cooperation that enhances China-Africa relations. Despite these differing views, the debate continues on whether FOCAC is genuinely a mutual partnership.
- Another widespread criticism of FOCAC is that it's seen as a tool for China's 'debt-trap Diplomacy.' Critics argue that the forum has become a platform where African leaders seek handouts from China through loans and grants, ultimately leading to unsustainable debt. Since the first FOCAC meeting in 2000, China has steadily doubled its financial commitments to Africa at each FOCAC forum from [US\\$5 billion in 2006 to US\\$60 billion in 2018](#). While these funds have helped many African countries address infrastructure needs and boost economic development, they have also led to significant debt issues.
- The FOCAC process also faces criticism for its apparent lack of transparency and limited public information about its agreements and deals. This results in Chinese debt contracted by African countries becoming [hidden debt](#), as the exact repayment terms and conditions remain unknown.
- While consultation and dialogue are central to the FOCAC process, there are concerns about the representation of diverse African voices in decision-making, with fears that China's preference for direct engagement with ruling elites sidelines critical input from African civil society and other African agencies. This has led to efforts to decentralise [FOCAC's ecosystem](#) to include various sub-forums and institutions, including think tanks and the business community. This particular criticism is more profound as the role of [the African Agency in shaping the future of the continent](#) has never been more crucial than today.

Understanding the FOCAC Framework

As noted earlier, FOCAC has become the foundation of China-Africa contemporary relations. It offers a platform for China and African countries to discuss and implement shared goals. Each FOCAC meeting results in various pledges for cooperation and financial commitments to African countries, announced by Chinese leaders and detailed in final documents like declarations and action plans.

These action plans outline the intentions for the next three years. Financial pledges have always been a key highlight, doubling at each meeting from 2006 and reaching US\$60 billion in 2015. However, the 2021 meeting saw a scaled-back in activities and a reduced financial pledge of US\$40 billion. It marked the first time China pledged less than at the previous FOCAC meeting. The failure to meet expectations was primarily attributed to the challenge posed by the global COVID-19 pandemic and [debt concerns of African countries](#).

Regarding structure and decision-making, the [FOCAC framework involves multi-layered mechanisms and processes](#) to discuss and pursue common interests. Decision-making occurs at three levels.

The highest level involves summits attended by Chinese and African leaders every three years. The second level includes meetings between senior officials from both sides, held twice before each major summit. The third level consists of ongoing interactions between diplomats, ensuring continuous consultation and feedback.

China actively initiates proposals within FOCAC, but decisions are made through a collaborative process. Proposals are refined with input from African counterparts before being finalised. Follow-up mechanisms ensure the effective implementation of agreements involving regular political discussions and a dedicated follow-up committee in China. African countries also have their follow-up committees to monitor and coordinate progress. These multilevel interactions allow for broad participation and equal opportunities for African countries to voice their interests.

Conclusion

In short, FOCAC has reshaped China-Africa relations through its collaborative framework. It sets an example for new international partnerships, emphasising the importance of shared impact and mutual benefit in global diplomacy. The inclusive approach has made FOCAC a unique platform for Africa to engage with a major international power on equal terms, unlike past interactions where African countries had less influence.

African leaders and officials value this equal opportunity to discuss and work together on political and economic issues. The impact of FOCAC is multifaceted, bringing significant benefits and drawing notable criticisms. While FOCAC has strengthened China-Africa relations through substantial trade, investment, and infrastructure development, it has been criticised for allegedly prioritising China's interests and

contributing to unsustainable debt in African countries. Addressing these concerns is critical to securing a strong FOCAC.

Going forward, there is a need for a nuanced understanding and constructive engagement with FOCAC's initiatives, focusing on enhancing transparency, promoting fair partnerships that acknowledge African agency, and addressing critical debt and environmental concerns.



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