

# CHINA'S AGENDA AT FOCAC 2024: CLIMATE, CONNECTIVITY & COALITIONS



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# Executive Summary

While some might believe that China's engagement with Africa is primarily driven by a desire for the continent's natural resources, in reality, the relationship is multifaceted. Africa's 54 votes at the UN, its substantial youth demographic, and the way that Africa-China cooperation enhances China's narrative that it is building a global community of developing countries highlight why China remains committed to Africa.

As China navigates increasing global pressure, particularly from the U.S. and its allies, this relationship has become even more critical. The upcoming 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing will be a defining moment for both sides, shaping the trajectory of this vital partnership.

This report deals with the Chinese perspective of the China-Africa relationship ahead of FOCAC in September 2024: why Africa matters to China, where the relationship currently stands, and what China's priorities are going into this meeting.

## Key Insights:

- **Economic Development:** While trade expansion remains a priority, the ambitious goal set in 2021 to increase African imports to China has seen modest progress. Still, China remains committed to developing and deepening its economic ties in Africa, and the 2024 FOCAC is expected to renew commitments, with a focus on agriculture and aiding African producers in accessing Chinese markets.
- **Political Alliances:** Beyond economic interests, China views Africa as a key partner in its efforts to establish alternative global governance structures more in line with its own priorities and less centered around Western power. Africa's moral weight as the heart of the Global South, and its 54 votes at the UN, make it an important partner in this quest.
- **Green Energy and Industrial Development:** Reflecting China's renewable energy investments under the Belt and Road Initiative, the upcoming FOCAC will likely emphasize green energy cooperation. Additionally, China's expertise in renewable energy positions it as a crucial partner for Africa's electrification, supporting the continent's broader industrial development goals.
- **Global Connectivity:** While FOCAC predates the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it has emerged as a key platform for BRI engagement. The BRI has focused on boosting connectivity between China and the rest of the world. This has historically been centered on physical infrastructure but increasingly includes other forms of connectivity, like trade and regulatory integration, ICT, training, and people-to-people exchange. These themes will likely feature heavily at FOCAC 2024.

The 2024 FOCAC summit is poised to reinforce China's role as a key partner in Africa's development and a leader in the Global South. Amid ongoing anti-China rhetoric from the U.S., this meeting will be critical in solidifying the strategic, economic, and diplomatic ties that bind China and Africa.







# FOCAC: What You Need to Know

## What is FOCAC?

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation is the most important diplomatic forum for the administration and negotiation of the complex relationship between Africa and China. The gathering sometimes takes place at the summit level (that is, involving presidents) and sometimes as ministerial meetings.

## When and where does FOCAC happen?

Since the first FOCAC meeting in 2000, the gathering has taken place every three years, alternating between Beijing and an African country. The last FOCAC gathering was held half virtually and half in-person in Dakar in 2021.

## What does FOCAC do?

FOCAC oversees and formalizes the complex relationships between thousands of Chinese and African actors. It focuses on a set of core areas, like peace & security, trade, and climate change, among others, the range of which has broadened as FOCAC has developed. While there are many Africa-China issues not covered by FOCAC, the gathering's agenda reveals what the two sides see as the most important areas of cooperation and sets broad goals and initiatives that determine the future of the Africa-China relationship.

## Who is involved?

Along with China, 53 African countries participate in FOCAC. The only country on the continent which isn't included is eSwatini, which maintains diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Formally switching ties to Beijing is a prerequisite for joining.

## Is FOCAC unique?

No and yes. FOCAC is the most prominent of the so-called "Africa Plus One" summits. Others include semi-regular meetings with India, Russia, and the EU, as well as the non-regular U.S.-Africa Leaders' Summit. Japan's Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) outdates FOCAC and arguably served as its template. However, despite the competitors, China's outsized role as a financial and trade partner for Africa, coupled with current geopolitical dynamics, makes FOCAC a bigger deal than many other Africa Plus One events.

## The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: A Timeline



## Who Heads FOCAC Processes on the Chinese Side?

### Honorary Co-Chairs



**Wang Yi**  
State Councilor/Minister of Foreign Affairs



**Wang Wentao**  
Minister of Commerce

### Co-Chairs



**Deng Li**  
Assistant Foreign Minister



**Qian Keming**  
Vice Minister of Commerce

### Secretary-General



**Du Xiaohui**  
Director-General, Department of African Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs



# FOCAC 2021-2024: Where Are We Now?

## Climate

The 2021 FOCAC summit was notable for an expansion of the platform's focus. The China-Africa Joint Declaration on Combating Climate Change was the most expansive joint statement on the climate crisis in the relationship to date and positioned climate cooperation as an important pillar within FOCAC.

The 2021 Declaration emphasized each country finding its own unique path to industrialization, which feeds into an emerging theme in Chinese messaging: that China can support a unique development model for Africa. It also positioned China as a fellow developing country, placing it on the same side as Africa in calling for increased funding from the developed world for climate adaptation and mitigation in the Global South.

### What to expect

In 2021, China promised more investment in renewable energy. This provided a glimpse into the emerging centrality of green energy in China's Belt and Road Initiative, as seen in announcements at October 2023's Belt and Road Forum. Look for a strong emphasis on green energy cooperation at FOCAC 2024.

**In a year of pervasive political uncertainty, FOCAC is likely to function as a space to emphasize and showcase the stability of China's relationship with the developing world.**

## Vaccines

The previous FOCAC meeting happened during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when many African countries were scrambling to obtain vaccines. Competitive "vaccine diplomacy" driven by China and the United States became a hallmark of this era.

At FOCAC in 2021, China committed to providing 1 billion additional doses of COVID vaccine to the continent. As the pandemic persisted, it became increasingly unclear whether this commitment would be fulfilled.

### What to expect

The vaccine issue is likely to be downplayed in favor of joint production of medication as seen, for example, between China and Zimbabwe.<sup>1</sup>

1. "Press Release: Recbio Signed a Strategic Cooperation Agreement with Zimbabwe National Biotechnology Administration and ICGEB China Regional Research Centre." Recbio, October 9, 2023. <https://www.recbio.cn/en/media/press-release/20231009/>.

Delivery was complicated by a few nested factors. First, China's zero-COVID policy interrupted many China-Africa exchange initiatives, including the deployment of medical teams. Second, the efficacy of Chinese COVID vaccines lagged behind their Western counterparts, leading some African countries to opt for Western alternatives. Third, while deliveries via Western aid programs were delayed by vaccine hoarding, their eventual availability displaced Chinese market-priced competitors, except in countries with particularly strong links to China.



Senegalese delegates enter the conference hall during the FOCAC meeting at the Diamniadio in Dakar, Senegal, on November 29, 2021. China's President Xi Jinping on November 29, 2021 pledged to offer one billion Covid-19 vaccine doses to Africa, in a speech made via videolink to a China-Africa summit near Senegal's capital Dakar. (Photo by SEYLOU / AFP)

## Trade

The 2021 Dakar meeting agreed to increase imports from Africa to \$300 billion by 2024. This commitment contrasts with the projection in the China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035 (released during the same summit) that China-Africa two-way trade will increase to \$300 billion by 2035 [see below]. The relation between the two goals has not been clarified. These ambitions dovetail with China's broader goals of strengthening its global supply chains against possible pressures from outside powers.

While the \$300 billion import commitment reflected ambitions on both sides, it didn't prove feasible by 2024. 2023 trade numbers showed a 1.5% increase in total trade, but Chinese imports of African goods actually shrank by 6.7% to around \$109 billion.<sup>2</sup>

2. Nyabiage, Jevans. "China-Africa Trade Hit US\$282 Billion in 2023 but Africa's Trade Deficit Widens, with Commodity Prices a Key Factor." South China Morning Post, February 1, 2024. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3250552/china-africa-trade-hit-282-billion-2023-africas-trade-deficit-widens-commodity-prices-key-factor>.

Factors include China's economic slowdown and African producers' inability to overcome China's stringent phytosanitary laws.

## Development Plans

The 2021 FOCAC meeting was notable for the launch of the China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035 plan. Unlike earlier FOCAC statements that made plans for the following three-year period, this document accounts for the next fourteen years. The China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035 plan represents a significant centering of the Africa-China relationship by directly linking it with Beijing's own China Vision 2035 planning document, which sets a series of intermediary development goals in preparation for the centenary of the People's Republic of China in 2049. The goals are designed to achieve broad-based development and a base level of national prosperity according to a plan set by Deng Xiaoping, a key architect of China's economic rise.

### What to expect

Look out for renewed pledges to increase trade, with a focus on the agricultural sector, as well as additional measures to help African producers navigate Chinese regulation and markets.

The expanded timeframe of the China-Africa Cooperation Vision and the link to the symbolically important national goals highlighted in the China Vision plan indicate the importance of the Africa-China relationship. The China-Africa Cooperation Vision plan lays out eight areas of cooperation:

- **Shared development;**
- **Trade, investment, and financing**
- **Industrial cooperation**
- **Green cooperation**
- **Health**
- **People-to-people exchange**
- **Peace and security**
- **Cooperation on global governance**



## Comparing the China-Africa Cooperation Vision and China Vision Plans

Category	China-Africa Cooperation Vision Goals	China Vision Goals
<b>Economic development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen Africa's industrial capacity by enhancing cooperation in infrastructure, trade (including increasing two-way trade to \$300 billion per year), and investment, especially in manufacturing sectors.</li> <li>China pledges to increase cumulative Chinese investment in the continent to \$60 billion, especially in support of African agriculture, manufacturing, infrastructure, environmental protection, digital economy, and blue economy.</li> <li>Step up Belt and Road partnerships between China and Africa</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasize innovation-driven and sustainable growth, focusing on developing advanced manufacturing and high-tech industries in China.</li> <li>Build more secure, resilient, and efficient modern supply chains not subject to disruptions and outside interference.</li> </ul>
<b>Trade, investment, and financing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote balanced trade, increase Chinese investment in Africa, and reduce trade barriers to foster a more robust economic relationship.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deepen economic integration with global markets, advance the Belt and Road Initiative, and pursue mutually beneficial trade agreements.</li> </ul>
<b>Industrial development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhance industrial capacity in Africa by building infrastructure, developing industrial parks, and transferring technology to boost local manufacturing and employment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on upgrading China's industrial infrastructure, enhancing manufacturing capabilities, and leading in sectors like advanced railway equipment, medical equipment, integrated circuits, and more.</li> </ul>
<b>Green development and climate change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote sustainable development in Africa through cooperation in environmental protection, climate change mitigation, and green energy projects.</li> <li>Comprehensively advance climate cooperation and work closely on joint climate response, meteorological monitoring, disaster prevention and mitigation, water resources utilization, desertification, land degradation and drought, among others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prioritize green development, aim for carbon neutrality by 2060, and lead in global efforts to combat climate change, including by boosting joint research and development with researchers from various countries focusing on climate change</li> </ul>

Category	China-Africa Cooperation Vision Goals	China Vision Goals
<b>Health cooperation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhance cooperation in public health, including epidemic prevention, control, and medical assistance, to build stronger health systems in Africa. Support traditional medicine methods.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen the national healthcare system, support traditional medicine methods, improve public health infrastructure, actively participate in international infectious disease prevention efforts, and enhance global health partnerships.</li> </ul>
<b>Training and people-to-people exchange</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on training and capacity-building initiatives, providing scholarships and professional development opportunities for African students and professionals.</li> <li>Deepen mutual understanding through cultural exchanges, education programs, and tourism, enhancing the friendship between China and Africa.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foster innovation and education to develop human capital that drives China's modernization and global competitiveness.</li> <li>Promote Chinese culture globally, and enhance soft power through international cultural exchanges.</li> </ul>
<b>Peace and security</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support peacekeeping efforts, combat terrorism, and enhance Africa's security capabilities to maintain regional stability.</li> <li>China supports "African solutions for African problems" and will pursue peace through cooperation and consultation.</li> <li>Internet security and the management and control of small arms will become new directions for cooperation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen comprehensive national security and safeguard sovereignty.</li> <li>Confront any challenges to state power, China's political system, and China's values.</li> <li>Respond to infiltration, sabotage, and subversion by hostile forces.</li> </ul>
<b>Global governance and multilateralism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen the China-Africa partnership, uphold multilateralism, and enhance Africa's role in international affairs and global governance.</li> <li>Work closely with Africa to improve global governance and enhance communication and coordination in arenas like the UN Security Council.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expand China's influence in international institutions, advocate for fair global governance, and build a community with a shared future for mankind.</li> <li>Build a global network of high-standard free trade zones.</li> </ul>

The document backs that up with concrete goals: to increase cumulative Chinese investment in the continent to \$60 billion and to increase two-way trade to \$300 billion per year.

#### What to expect

Now that their respective long-term development roadmaps have been harmonized, this year's FOCAC will likely emphasize China's uniqueness as a model of modernization and development for Africa.



*A China-Africa liner setting sail from Yantai Port to Guinea, Africa, loaded with railway locomotives, engineering vehicles, machinery, and building materials in Yantai, China, on May 15, 2024. (Photo by Costfoto/NurPhoto)*

# China's Priorities for FOCAC 2024

## Green Energy

Africa-China cooperation on infrastructure used to be dominated by the mega-budgets of the 2010s, which tended to support large-scale infrastructure projects undertaken by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs). This had two knock-on effects: first, the electricity projects characteristic of this phase of the BRI tended to focus on conventional thermal power stations, partly led by the expertise of China's SOEs. In turn, these led to large debt loads for recipient countries.

This year's FOCAC summit will be the first in the era of the reformulated Belt and Road Initiative, built around the slogan of "small is beautiful." This reformulation was displayed particularly prominently during the Belt and Road Forum of October 2023 and is expected to shape this year's FOCAC



commitments too. The “small” refers to more contained projects with smaller budgets and shorter repayment windows. The “beautiful” aspect relates to projects having both small environmental and social impacts, and large developmental benefits.

## **China is promoting its unique record of extremely rapid and broad-based development success as an alternative model of modernization to those offered by Western countries.**

### **Supply**

The shift to “small and beautiful” was largely interpreted as a response to the debt impacts of the BRI, both in the form of debt distress among recipient countries and a growing debt crisis within China. However, it was also inspired by the awareness within China of the growing role of renewable electricity as a driver of Chinese growth. Thanks to heavy investment, China’s solar component sector now represents 80% of the world supply. China invested ten times more than Europe did into its renewables sector, which currently makes up 7% of China’s total trade deficit with the rest of the world.

Political tensions with China’s traditional trading partners are now putting this sector under stress, with growing trade measures in Europe and the U.S. against Chinese solar panels, batteries, and other technologies. The emphasis on green energy as a key axis of the newly reformulated BRI points to an awareness within China of limited growth capacity in the EU and the U.S., in contrast to almost unlimited growth potential in the Global South.

### **Demand**

Africa’s shortage of dependable and sustainable electricity lies at the heart of many of its challenges. It holds back education initiatives, keeps women and youth locked in unproductive subsistence cycles, and fatally hampers national and regional industrialization plans. China’s globally unique advantage in renewable energy could make it a game-changer on the continent, both for urban and rural electrification. This doesn’t only imply building sustainable electricity generation capacity in the form of solar and wind farms. Chinese companies are also leaders in smart grid and electricity storage technology, which opens the possibility of a much broader impact.

## Barriers

However, this will depend on a closer alignment between the Chinese green energy sector and state funders. The latter have traditionally been closer aligned to SOEs that focused on conventional power, rather than the private companies running the renewables sector. Green energy would have to be integrated more fundamentally in African development and industrialization plans. This would include overcoming entrenched knowledge deficits that make African policymakers wary of newer technology compared to the familiar certainties of coal, as well as entrenched hydrocarbon bias among policymakers with an interest in the mining sector.



*Aerial view of the China-financed solar power plant Garissa Solar in Garissa County, Kenya. Xinhua / Alamy Stock Photo*

## Global Connectivity

Since its coining in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative has focused on boosting connectivity between China and the rest of the world. Originally, this led to a concentration on physical infrastructure and building links between China and major markets (for example, between China and Europe via Central Asia). While this remains a core BRI objective, the initiative has expanded to include numerous other forms of connectivity, including via trade and regulatory integration and using training and people-to-people exchange to build closer connections between China and the rest of the Belt and Road. While FOCAC predates the BRI itself, it has emerged as a key platform for BRI engagement, one that shapes China's interaction with the wider Global South.



*Chinese tech giant Huawei has found success in the Global South due to its ability to provide robust, low-cost network solutions at all levels of the tech stack, from undersea cables to handset sales. /Imaginechina viaAFP / Imaginechina / Sun meng*

## ICT

Data network provision has emerged at the core of China's broader ambition to promote connectivity. Chinese companies like Huawei provide robust, low-cost network solutions at all levels of the tech stack, from undersea cables to handset sales. This, in turn, has put Huawei in the crosshairs of Western lawmakers anxious about Chinese surveillance and the possible control of Chinese entities over Global North utility networks. The resulting political pressure has led Chinese companies to seek out markets in the Global South, where demand for cheap data networks is driven by large youth populations. In addition, Chinese companies are increasingly combining data and electricity provision, increasing their appeal to recipient governments in Africa and other developing regions.

## Alternative systems

The close engagement between China's ICT sector and African countries forms part of a wider drive: to carve out spaces for Chinese companies and systems in the rest of the world. For example, China is promoting the use of its BeiDou satellite navigation system over the U.S.-driven GPS system. The similar pursuit of alternative norms and cooperation platforms is partially driving China's coining of the "space silk road," which underlies its cooperation with African countries like Nigeria on satellite technology, as well as a drive to reshape global norms to reflect Chinese technical specifications in a host of fields. These are likely to feature at this year's FOCAC summit.

## Amplifying China's say

ICT regulation is a key example of this expansion of influence. In contrast to the U.S.'s promotion of a universally open internet led by large corporations and a global monitoring body, China is promoting the idea of internet sovereignty. This emphasizes local data storage and a strong overseeing role for national governments, which in turn raises concerns about government intervention to crack down on local dissent. Several African governments have indicated their support for this approach. China's campaigns around these issues have the larger aim of making the global system more amenable to Chinese actors and regulations. Africa plays an important role in this process because many such systems are being built from the ground up, which offers both Chinese companies and regulators a unique opportunity to increase their influence.



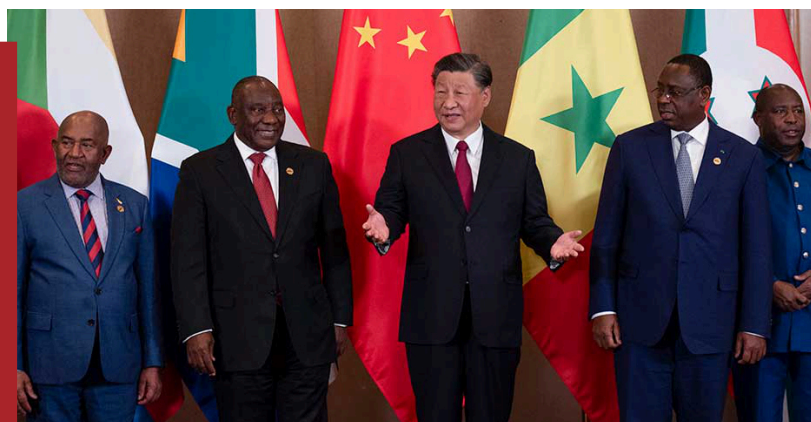
## Growing global concerns about a possible second Trump presidency – especially in Africa, which was targeted during his first term – are likely to strengthen connections between the continent and China.

### Political Alliance

This year's FOCAC comes at a moment when China is facing growing opposition from a U.S.-centric alliance that includes the EU, Australia and important East Asian economies like Japan and South Korea. In response, building ties with the Global South as both a set of emerging markets and an emerging global political community is emerging as an important Chinese counter-strategy. China's instrumental role in forming and enlarging the BRICS (originally Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) group is one example among many of how China is building alternative institutions and platforms for engaging with Global South powers in different regions.

FOCAC was one of the oldest of these platforms and influenced the formation of others. It remains key in harmonizing China's international messaging with the priorities of the Global South. In a year

of pervasive political uncertainty, FOCAC is likely to function as a space to emphasize and showcase the stability of China's relationship with the developing world.



(From L to R) President of Comoros Azali Assoumani (L), South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, President of China Xi Jinping, and Senegalese President Macky Sall attend the China-Africa Leaders' Roundtable Dialogue on the last day of the 2023 BRICS Summit in Johannesburg on August 24, 2023. ALET PRETORIUS / POOL / AFP

#### South-South connections

Fundamental to this outreach is China positioning itself as a developing country and an inalienable member of the Global South. While China's developing country status is coming under increasing attack from Western poli-

cymakers because of its status as the world's second-largest economy, parts of the country still face systemic underdevelopment on par with other parts of the Global South. Beijing is bolstering its status as an emerging Global South superpower by politically aligning itself with a vocal Global South coalition around issues like the war in Israel and the need to reform global governance institutions like the UN Security Council and the International Monetary Fund.



## Modernization outreach

While China sells itself as a developing country, it also emphasizes its outlier status. In other words, China is promoting its unique record of extremely rapid and broad-based development success as an alternative model of modernization to those offered by Western countries. This year's FOCAC will likely provide a prominent space for the promotion of China's Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative and Global Civilization Initiative as forms of alternative modernity that avoids Western modernity's roots in colonial exploitation. This, in turn, bolsters China's drive to establish alternative global governance structures more in line with its own priorities and less centered around Western power. Africa's moral weight as the heart of the Global South, and its 54 votes at the UN, makes it an important partner in this quest.

## U.S. election

The international pressures facing China are particularly intense in 2024 because of the key role it plays in the U.S. elections. Both the Trump and Biden administrations have pursued aggressive anti-China legislation, and hostility towards China's rise is one of the few issues Democrats and Republicans can agree on. For that reason, China threat narratives and performative anti-China announcements are likely to feature prominently, which will also pile pressure on Beijing in other regions of the world.

However, growing global concerns about a possible second Trump presidency – especially in Africa, which was targeted during his first term – are likely to strengthen connections between the continent and China. This is despite the efforts from the Biden administration to reshape the U.S.-Africa relationship via expansive new infrastructure plans. Despite the goodwill bought by infrastructure initiatives like the Lobito corridor, many African policymakers will arguably be focused on shoring up ties with China as a hedge against U.S. unpredictability.



*The President of South Africa Cyril Ramaphosa speaks via video link during the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) at U.N. headquarters on September 23, 2021 in New York City. Spencer Platt/Getty Images/AFP (Photo by SPENCER PLATT / GETTY IMAGES NORTH AMERICA / Getty Images via AFP)*

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