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African governments are shaping the future of the China-Africa relations

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation has become a major diplomatic event, and increasingly Africa is able to guide the agenda, write Tom Baxter and Yuezhou Yang.

One of the largest and most important events on China's diplomatic calendar, the 9th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation was held in Beijing from 4 to 6 September. The triennial gathering of Chinese leaders, heads of state, and delegations from over 50 African countries concluded, as has become customary, with an action plan containing long lists of areas of cooperation, new initiatives, and areas of agreement and alignment.

The implications of the **Beijing Action Plan (2025-2027)** will take months to untangle and interpret, but four key areas show clear takeaways: the formal upgrading of the political relationship, the financial commitments, the prevalence of green and low carbon technologies, and the increasing alignment of the FOCAC outcomes and African countries' development priorities.

An "all-weather" partnership

One of the key signals from the FOCAC meeting was that of consistency and dependability in the China-Africa relationship. Questions were being asked about the strength of the relationship during the Covid-19 pandemic period. The previous FOCAC took place online rather than in person, but the 9th FOCAC has demonstrated that both sides are committed to the relationship.

Formalising this trend, President Xi Jinping **officially announced** the upgrading of the relationship from a "comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership", to an "all-weather China-Africa community with a shared future for the new era". This places the China-Africa relationship within the highest rungs of China's **unofficial hierarchy of diplomatic partnerships**, the terms "all-weather" and "community with a shared future for the new era" are both key indicators of the significance placed on the relationship.

\$50 billion financial commitments

At the meeting in Beijing, China pledged \$50 billion over the next three years. While this figure is about the same as that pledged in the last FOCAC, **the ODI has noted that \$30 billion** of the total will be made up of credit lines, another \$10 billion will be used for investment promotion for Chinese companies, and \$10 billion more for 'other assistance'. This leaves little space for the kind of bilateral lending which characterised earlier periods of China-Africa development cooperation. It reflects an ongoing shift from Chinese financial institutions towards more diversified and commercially oriented lending.

The Beijing Action Plan is full of references to collaboration with other financial institutions, such as the Africa Development Bank, in order to co-finance projects. The breakdown of financial commitments also signals a desire to promote investment and trade, rather than simply building infrastructure.

However, despite the changing composition of China's financial offers to Africa, infrastructure development, which has been at the core of China-Africa cooperation for many decades, has not entirely slipped off the agenda. In fact, the 9th FOCAC pledged to develop 30 new infrastructure projects, in contrast to the previous FOCAC's 10. What may be changing, however, is the scale and nature of these projects. Compared to the early years of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation, the new projects tend to be smaller in scale, more diverse in their financing models and connected with China's powerful green technology sectors. These new projects are sometimes referred to as **"small and beautiful"** by the Chinese government.

FOCAC also signals the coexistence of the BRI and the Global Development Initiative (GDI). Since the GDI was announced by Xi Jinping in 2021, there has been much media and pundit discussion that it would replace the BRI, the first decade of which largely adopted a debt model that has put strain on debtor and creditor alike. It has become increasingly clear, underlined in the Beijing Action Plan, that this is not the case. It seems, rather, that BRI is being seen as the vehicle through which infrastructure projects are promoted, while the GDI is a vehicle to promote other aspects of development such as technology exchange, training and community-focused initiatives. Some commentators have referred to this distinction as the **"hardware" and the "software"** of China's development cooperation.

Green development cooperation

The third key takeaway from the 9th FOCAC is the prevalence of so-called "green development." The previous FOCAC saw a standalone declaration on climate change cooperation. The new Beijing Action Plan 2024-2027 integrates this prominently through the main document. Green development not only appears in the action plan's chapters on climate change and sustainable development, but

also in the chapters on economic cooperation, infrastructure development, trade and investment, and is also increasingly linked with peace and security, culture, and people-to-people exchanges.

More concretely, the previously mentioned 30 pledged new infrastructure projects all relate to renewable and low carbon energy, connected with China's powerful green, low carbon and energy efficiency technologies. Just how green, sustainable, and socially conscious these projects will be is something that should be watched closely over the coming years. Especially given that potentially environmentally damaging projects such as transition mineral mining and processing are often classified as "green" due to their importance in battery and other low carbon technology value chains.

Stronger African agency in shaping FOCAC outcomes

A final takeaway that is worth stressing is the increasing alignment between the FOCAC outcome documents and African governments' development agendas, as represented, for example, in Agenda 2063, the African Union's blueprint for the continent. The Beijing Action Plan mentions the African Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development (AUDA-NEPAD), the Africa Mining Vision and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). As Jade Scarfe from the consultancy Development Reimagined, noted at a recent event at LSE, the new plan included mentions of proposed new initiatives such as an African Credit Agency. With China having been a major supporter of Africa's push for admission into the G20, Chinese support for proposals to reshape global economic and political architecture as it relates to Africa is seen by African policymakers as extremely important, she pointed out.

The alignment of the Beijing Action Plan and African governments' perspectives is a tangible reminder of the strong agency African governments hold in the relationship with China. Despite the obvious mismatches in economic and political power, FOCAC is proving to be a powerful forum to advance African interests.

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