



# UNDERSTANDING THE SUCCESS OF CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICIES IN AFRICA THROUGH THE PRISM OF AFRICAN AGENCY

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# Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
Introduction.....	5
The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.....	8
The Belt and Road Initiative .....	12
The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation .....	15
Conclusion.....	19
About CDD.....	21
About the Author.....	21

## Executive Summary

The ninth Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) taking place in Beijing from 4<sup>th</sup> September to 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2024, marks the first in-person FOCAC since the Covid-19 pandemic. As China adopts a more cautious approach to lending in Africa, this forum is highly anticipated, with expectations of substantial African participation, continuing the trend of FOCAC being the most popular "One+Africa" summit.

China has been Africa's largest trading partner since 2008 and its leading provider of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) since 2013. Despite the economic asymmetries in their relationship, which have fueled narratives of "debt trap diplomacy" and a "new scramble for Africa", this report shifts the focus to the agency of African leaders within this partnership. Rather than concentrating on China's intentions, the report examines how China's foreign policy principles and initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and FOCAC, empower African leaders to exercise agency.

China's five principles of peaceful coexistence—mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence—have been central to its foreign policy for 70 years. These principles, reaffirmed in China's 2023 global foreign policy white paper, underpin the FOCAC and resonate with African leaders seeking autonomy from Western conditionalities. The principles have allowed African leaders to secure aid and loans without compromising their domestic policymaking, thereby enhancing their agency.

The report further explores how the BRI and FOCAC serve as platforms for African leaders to leverage China's economic power, diversify partnerships, and attract investments. Despite the challenges and asymmetries in the China-Africa relationship, these initiatives have provided African leaders with significant bargaining power, enabling them to pursue their development agendas more

independently. This agency, however, remains constrained by the broader strategic interests of China.

## Introduction

Between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2024, the ninth Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) will take place in Beijing. The first FOCAC happening in person since the end of the Covid-19 pandemic is highly anticipated in a context where China seems to be taking a more careful approach to lending on the African continent.<sup>1</sup> FOCAC is the most popular ‘One+Africa’ summit in terms of the number and quality of attendants. The last FOCAC before the Covid-19 pandemic of in 2018 was attended by fifty-three African countries delegations of which forty-eight were headed by heads of states.<sup>2</sup> In comparison, the last United States–Africa Leaders’ Summit in 2022 received fifty delegations including ‘only’ thirty-six heads of state.<sup>3</sup>

China has been Africa’s most important trading partner since 2008,<sup>4</sup> its largest provider of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) since 2013,<sup>5</sup> and it was the largest bilateral lender on the continent in at least thirty-two African countries in 2020.<sup>6</sup> Probably in part because of the asymmetries characterizing the economic relations between China and Africa, observers tend to focus on the intention or strategies of China in Africa, obscuring the role of fifty-four African actors in this relationship. Illustrating this tendency are the narratives of ‘debt trap diplomacy’,<sup>7</sup> which tend to infantilize African political leaders, and of the ‘New scramble for Africa’,<sup>8</sup> which tend

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<sup>1</sup> See Moses, O. *et al.* (2023) *A New State of Lending CHINESE LOANS TO AFRICA*. rep. Boston, Massachusetts: Global Development Policy Center.

<sup>2</sup> See Alfa Shaban, A.R. (2019) *Handful African presidents not attending 2018 FOCAC summit in China*, *Africanews*. Available at: <https://www.africanews.com/2018/09/03/handful-african-presidents-not-attending-2018-focac-summit-in-china/>.

<sup>3</sup> See *Africa: Heads of delegation for U.S-Africa Leaders Summit - White House* (2022) *allAfrica.com*. Available at: <https://allafrica.com/stories/202212130597.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See *Data: China-Africa Trade* (2024) *China Africa Research Initiative*. Available at: <https://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Alden, C. (2020) *China and Africa: Debt, development and geopolitics*, *ISPI*. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/china-and-africa-debt-development-and-geopolitics-27025>

<sup>7</sup> In this seminal article, Deborah Brautigam debunks and retraces the history of the ‘debt trap diplomacy’ narrative: Brautigam, D. (2019) ‘A critical look at Chinese “debt-trap diplomacy”: The rise of a meme’, *Area Development and Policy*, 5(1), pp. 1–14. doi:10.1080/23792949.2019.1689828.

<sup>8</sup> See Soulé, F. (2020) “africa+1” summit diplomacy and the “New Scramble” Narrative: Recentering African Agency’, *African Affairs*, 119(477), pp. 633–646. doi:10.1093/afraf/adaa015. For a presentation of the narrative or see *The New Scramble for Africa* (2014) *Al Jazeera*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/empire/2014/7/27/the-new-scramble-for-africa>; Poplak, R. (2016) *The New Scramble for Africa: How China became the partner of choice*, *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/dec/22/the-new-scramble-for-africa-how-china-became-the-partner-of-choice>; Harms, R. (2019) *What a new scramble could mean for Africans*, *The Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/12/03/what-new-scramble-could-mean-africans/>; *The gulf’s scramble for Africa is reshaping the continent* (2024) *The Economist*. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2024/03/14/the-gulfs-scramble-for-africa-is-reshaping-the-continent>.

to invisibilize them. Researchers like Chipaike and Knowledge have noted that the literature on Africa's international relations with non-African actors typically portrays the continent as a supplicant actor dependent on major powers.<sup>9</sup> In this view, Africa lacks the ability to influence development partners such as China, due to the significant economic disparities characterizing their relationship. These narratives negate the agency of African leaders in their relationship with China.<sup>10</sup>

This short report intends to focus not on what China is aiming to accomplish in Africa but at understanding the appeal of China's foreign policy approach and policies in Africa as demonstrated by the unrivalled attendance at FOCAC as well as by its dominant economic position on the African continent. It presents how China's central foreign policy principles, its five principles of peaceful coexistence, major foreign policies in Africa, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the FOCAC provided African political leaders with agency in various ways, explaining a part of the success of Chinese diplomacy in Africa.

The Five principles of Peaceful Coexistence were first enunciated in the 1954 Panchsheel Sino-Indian Agreement, the principles are as follow:

- mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity
- mutual non-aggression
- non- interference in each other's internal affairs
- equality and mutual benefit
- peaceful coexistence

These constitutionalized principles have been guiding China's foreign policy for seventy years and have recently been reaffirmed in the first chapter of the last Chinese global foreign policy white paper in September 2023 titled "A Global Community of

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<sup>9</sup> Chipaike, R. and Knowledge, M.H. (2018) 'The question of African Agency in international relations', *Cogent Social Sciences*, 4(1), p. 1487257. doi:10.1080/23311886.2018.1487257.

<sup>10</sup> 'Agency' is understood here as an actor's 'ability to make independent decisions and strengthen its bargaining power' see Alden, C. Wu, Y.-S. and van Staden, C. (2018) *Vol 286, In the Driver's Seat? African Agency and Chinese Power at FOCAC, the AU and the BRI*. Johannesburg, South Africa: South African Institute of International Affairs.

Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions.”<sup>11</sup> For authors such as Ting Wang and Weidong Zhu<sup>12</sup> these principles constitute the foundation of the FOCAC.

The FOCAC is a formal forum between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and all African states with the exception of the Kingdom of Eswatini. It is a ‘One + Africa’ Summit like the ones organized by the United-States, France, Turkey, India, Japan, Italy, Saudi Arabia and others. It is the primary multi-lateral coordination mechanism between African countries and China. Since the first FOCAC in 2000, it has happened every three years, alternating locations between Africa and China. According to David Monyae, the heightened engagement between China and Africa, driven by the alignment of their strategic interests towards the late 20th century, resulted in the creation of the FOCAC in 2000.<sup>13</sup> Today, the FOCAC has a holistic focus. The 2022-2024 action plan that came out of the 2021 Dakar FOCAC contains nine sections on Political Cooperation, Economic Cooperation, Social Development Cooperation, Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges, Peace and Security Cooperation, Green Development, Experience Sharing on State Governance as well as FOCAC Institutional Development.<sup>14</sup> The BRI, a central foreign policy for China, is mentioned in seven of the nine sections of the action plan.

The BRI is a global infrastructure development strategy launched by the Chinese government in 2013 which initially aimed at creating land and maritime trade corridors to better link Europe, Asia, and Eastern Africa. The project evolved in scope and, in December 2023, 146 to 151 countries including China were members of the BRI.<sup>15</sup> 52 African countries constitute more than a third of these members. The BRI is

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<sup>11</sup> Let’s note that the five principles of peaceful coexistence while still mentioned in official documents are now often replaced by the newer leading concept of China’s foreign policy of “community with a shared future for mankind” which was constitutionalized in 2018. This concept subsumes the five principles of peaceful coexistence by including all of its components. In the last Africa-focused white paper issued by the Chinese government in 2021, there was no mention of the five principles of peaceful coexistence but fifteen occurrence of this newer concept which structured the whole paper.

<sup>12</sup> See Wang, T. & Zhu, W. (2020). *The 20th Anniversary of the Foundation of the FOCAC: Retrospect and Prospect*. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.64477>

<sup>13</sup> See Monyae, D. (2023) China and Africa, 20 years since the forum on africa–china cooperation, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* [Preprint]. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.726.

<sup>14</sup> For an interesting analysis of the 2021 focac outcome see Large, D. (2022) ‘China, Africa and the 2021 DAKAR FOCAC’, *African Affairs*, 121(483), pp. 299–319. doi:10.1093/afraf/adac014.

<sup>15</sup> See Nedopil, C. (2023) Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative; Shanghai, Green Finance & Development Center, FISF Fudan University, [www.greenfdc.org](http://www.greenfdc.org)



both an economic and political enterprise as it aims at building a community with a shared future for mankind, a central political concept constitutionalized by China in 2018. In 2017, at the opening ceremony of the inaugural Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Xi Jinping declared that “moving closer towards a community of shared future for mankind’ is the ultimate goal of the Belt and Road Initiative”<sup>16</sup>. In 2023, the last Chinese global foreign policy white paper, which is displayed on the website of the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, states that “The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a vivid example of building a global community of shared future”<sup>17</sup>

The next section presents how China’s main foreign policy principles since Mao’s era, the five principles of peaceful coexistence, freed policy space for African political leaders. China’s non-interference principle derived from those principles meant aid or loans without conditionalities for African leaders. Also, the adherence of African countries to the ‘One China Principle’ has historically been rewarded financially by China. The second and third sections respectively looks at how the two flagship Chinese policies in Africa, the BRI and the FOCAC, provides African political leaders with agency to free policy space as well as to bargain with other extra-African partners with limitations owing to the asymmetries characterizing the China-Africa relationships.

## **The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence**

Already in 2008, Abdoulaye Wade, then president of Senegal, declared in an interview that “China’s approach to [African] needs is simply better adapted than the slow and sometimes patronising post-colonial approach of European investors, donor

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<sup>16</sup> See Zhang, D. (2018) ‘The concept of “community of common destiny” in China’s diplomacy: Meaning, motives and implications’, *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, 5(2), pp. 196–207. doi:10.1002/app5.231.

<sup>17</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (2023) *A global community of Shared Future: China’s proposals and actions, The Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation*. Available at: <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n101/2023/1010/c127-916.html>.

organisations and non-governmental organisations.”<sup>18</sup> To understand this citation and China’s approach, it is necessary to understand China’s adherence to its aforementioned five principles of peaceful coexistence.

The principles of non-interference and mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity are of particular importance. China has consistently presented its support to African countries, whether through aid or special loans as apolitical. That is why in 2013 during his first African trip, Xi Jinping declared that China would “offer, as always, necessary assistance to Africa with no political strings attached.”<sup>19</sup> This is in contrast with financing from western countries or institutions which is usually accompanied by macroeconomic, political or, in recent years, climate conditionalities<sup>20</sup>, an inconvenience for African political leaders who want to freely design their policies. Jean-Pierre Cabestan also notes that the success of Chinese companies in securing contracts in Africa is due to their lower bid prices and their ability to begin and finish projects quickly.<sup>21</sup> The adherence of China to its non-interference principle frees up policy space for African leaders by allowing them to obtain loans and aid without abandoning the design of their political and economic governance, thus allowing them to exert more agency. Exemplifying this, Lucy Corkin explains that, in 2001, Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos reached out to the IMF for financial assistance. Although the IMF was willing to provide loans, it demanded greater transparency, and the implementation of macroeconomic reforms aimed at halting inflation by reducing public spending and borrowing. the Angolan political leadership found these conditions unacceptable, prompting President dos Santos to turn to China in 2002, which, abiding to its foreign policy principle of non-interference, did not condition its loans to political and economic reforms in Angola. Since 2002, China has committed over \$45 billion in loans to Angola, more than to any

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<sup>18</sup> See Wade, A. (2008) *Time for the west to practise what it preaches*, *Financial Times*. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/5d347f88-c897-11dc-94a6-0000779fd2ac>.

<sup>19</sup> See Xi, J. (2013) *Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People’s Republic of China At the Julius Nyerere International Convention Center 25 March 2013, Embassy of the people’s republic of china in the kingdom of the Netherlands*. Available at: [http://nl.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/201304/t20130403\\_2650815.htm](http://nl.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/201304/t20130403_2650815.htm).

<sup>20</sup> See Guillaumont, P. Boussichas, M. Dsouza, A. (2023) *The Evolution of Aid Conditionality: A Review of the Literature of the Last Twenty Years*, EBA Working Paper.

<sup>21</sup> Cabestan, J. (2023) ‘The belt and road initiative and China’s hegemony in Africa’, *Orbis*, 67(4), pp. 544–564. doi:10.1016/j.orbis.2023.08.005.

other African nation<sup>22</sup>. According to Corkin, the Angolan president and his inner circle leveraged their relationship with Beijing to, inter alia, counterbalance the influence of other countries on their political economy. She notes that, in a post-civil war context, Angolan political elites used Chinese financial assistance as a tool for state-building, exploiting the policy space provided by their relationship with China to pursue their priorities<sup>23</sup>.

China only imposes one political precondition while dealing with regimes across the continent. They have to abide to the One China Principle. This condition must be met by all countries wishing to have formal diplomatic ties or to obtain any loan or aid emanating from China. The One China principle asserts that there is only one sovereign state named China, with the PRC as its sole legitimate government, and considers Taiwan an inseparable part of China. It rejects the idea of two separate states named China or the notion that China and Taiwan are distinct countries. The respect of the five principles of peaceful coexistence entails that African countries cannot recognize Taiwan and the PRC simultaneously as this would be interfering in what the PRC considers to be an internal affair and having relations with the island would be considered by China as an infringement on its sovereignty. This is why the only African country not taking part in the FOCAC is Eswatini. It is the last African country to officially recognize the Republic of China, commonly known as Taiwan. The last country to have switched recognition from Taiwan to the PRC is Burkina Faso in 2018, it's change of obedience was the key for the G5 Sahel Joint Force to obtain financial support from China.<sup>24</sup> For decades, African countries gained agency by leveraging this diplomatic rivalry to obtain funds from China and Taiwan and conduct the policies of their choice. Between 1989 and 1999, there were fifteen changes in the recognition of African countries, with Liberia even changing its position three times during the decade. According to official Chinese sources, China's new aid commitments in 1990 increased by 68%, reflecting diplomatic competition with

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<sup>22</sup> Chinese loans to Africa Database (2024) Available at: <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database/>

<sup>23</sup> See Corkin, L. (2016) *Uncovering African Agency - Angola's Management of China's Credit Lines* [Preprint]. doi:10.4324/9781315549354

<sup>24</sup> See Burcu, O. and Bertrand, E. (2019) *Explaining China's latest catch in Africa, The Diplomat*. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/explaining-chinas-latest-catch-in-africa/>.

Taiwan.<sup>25</sup> Sun notes that Niger switched its recognition from China to Taiwan in 1992 in exchange for a \$50 million loan, and Chad did the same in 1997 in exchange for a \$125 million loan.<sup>26</sup> Ian Taylor provides further examples of U-turns. In 1997, São Tomé and Príncipe negotiated a \$30 million loan over three years for Taipei's recognition alone. The Gambian government recognized Taiwan's independence in 1995 and received \$35 million in aid from Taiwan. Senegalese leaders made three diplomatic switches from Beijing to Taipei in order to receive aid.<sup>27</sup>

While the five principles of peaceful coexistence are still included in the PRC's constitution, let's note that Beijing's steadfast commitment to non-interference is difficult to reconcile with the reality of its increasing security involvement in Africa. Ricardo Soares de Oliveira and Harry Verhoeven note that African states have demonstrated significant agency by transforming their fragility into a valuable discursive and material asset within an evolving transnational context and obtain support, including from China, in security matters.<sup>28</sup> Demands by African actors for a more involved China are observable in numerous cases ranging from mediating political conflicts, as seen in the ongoing diplomatic strife between Benin and Niger,<sup>29</sup> assisting in peace negotiations in South Sudan,<sup>30</sup> to participating in anti-terrorism efforts in Mali.<sup>31</sup> During the opening ceremony of the 2021 Dakar FOCAC, Aissata Tall Sall, the co-chair of the eighth ministerial FOCAC and Senegal's Foreign Minister called for support from China to assist in addressing terrorism and irredentism issues in the Sahel.<sup>32</sup> As China's material interests have deepened in Africa, its classic sovereigntist approach has evolved. Today, Beijing contributes more staff to UN peacekeeping missions than any permanent member of the Security Council.

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<sup>25</sup> Brautigam, D., 2009. *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*. Oxford University Press, pp.67.

<sup>26</sup> See Sun, Y. 2014. China's Aid to Africa: Monster or Messiah? Brookings. Available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/02/07-china-aid-to-africa-sun>.

<sup>27</sup> See Taylor, I., 1998. China's foreign policy towards Africa in the 1990s. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36(3), pp.443-460.

<sup>28</sup> See de Oliveira, R.S. and Verhoeven, H. (2018) 'Taming intervention: Sovereignty, statehood and political order in Africa', *Survival*, 60(2), pp. 7–32. doi:10.1080/00396338.2018.1448558.

<sup>29</sup> See Bhattacharya, S. (2024) Deconstructing China's Interest in the Niger-Benin Rapprochement, *The Diplomat*. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/deconstructing-chinas-interest-in-the-niger-benin-rapprochement/>.

<sup>30</sup> *China's foreign policy experiment in South Sudan* (2017) *International Crisis Group*. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/south-sudan/288-china-s-foreign-policy-experiment-south-sudan>.

<sup>31</sup> van Staden, C. (2024) *Chinese Counterterrorism in Africa*. rep. Washington, D.C: Stimson Center.

<sup>32</sup> See *Au Sommet Chine-Afrique, Le Sénégal demande le soutien de Pékin au Sahel* (2021) *France 24*. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20211128-au-sommet-chine-afrique-le-s%C3%A9n%C3%A9gal-demande-le-soutien-de-p%C3%A9kin-au-sahel>.

As the presence of China and Chinese nationals in Africa continues to grow, China's adherence to the principles of peaceful coexistence is increasingly being put into question. Notably, in 2017, China shifted its noninterference stance by establishing its first overseas naval base in Djibouti. Originally opposed to overseas bases, Beijing set up this base, *inter alia*, to support the People's Liberation Army naval antipiracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, which began in 2009 to counter Somali pirate attacks. For Djibouti, where several foreign military bases already exist, China's new base primarily serves as a means to attract infrastructure funding and generate revenues.<sup>33</sup> As previously noted, these changes offer avenues for African leaders to advance their own agendas. This is also true regarding China's flagship foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative.

## The Belt and Road Initiative

Since the nineties, and formally through the announcement of the 'Going Out' Policy by Jiang Zemin in 2000, China encouraged its enterprises to export and to invest overseas. China became economically dominant in Africa because of the complementarities of the Chinese and many African economies. Chaponnière and Gabas note that in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China would import natural resources from Africa and supply consumer and intermediate goods at affordable prices to markets in demand.<sup>34</sup> The BRI in Africa follows a similar economic rationale. Wu Zhengyu contends that the primary goal of China's BRI is to help China's economy overcome current limitations and tailbacks by gaining access to new markets and securing energy and raw material supplies.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See Shim, D.H. and Eisenman, J. (2023) *China's relations with Africa: A new era of strategic engagement*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>34</sup> Gabas, J.-J. and Chaponnière, J.-R. (2012) *Le temps de la Chine en Afrique* [Preprint]. doi:10.3917/kart.gabas.2012.01.

<sup>35</sup> Wu, Z. (2019) 'Towards naval normalcy: "open seas protection" and Sino-US maritime relations', *The Pacific Review*, 32(4), pp. 666–693. doi:10.1080/09512748.2018.1553890.

It is crucial to avoid depicting the BRI as an initiative forced upon African governments by a dominant China. As noted by Shinn and Eisenmann, Africa was initially an afterthought in the BRI. Initially, there was no formal mention of Africa's role in the initiative, as evidenced by China's 2015 Africa policy paper, which did not reference the BRI. They assert that it was only after African leaders inquired about the benefits of the BRI for their countries that China decided to include Africa.<sup>36</sup> On a continent with annual infrastructure needs of \$130–170 billion and a financing gap of \$68–108 billion, China's initiative was warmly received.<sup>37</sup> Currently, around 150 countries have signed Memoranda of Understanding to participate in the BRI, including 52 out of 54 African countries, making up more than a third of the total participants.

The BRI provides African leaders with agency. It provides them with additional or alternative sources of funding to develop infrastructures. It opens new avenues to develop policies without conditionalities, aside from abiding to the One China principle. However, Chinese finance also comes with limitations. Studying the Sicomines Case in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Johanna Malm talks of 'China-powered' African Agency.<sup>38</sup> The Sicomines agreement is particularly interesting to analyse because it is, like numerous BRI projects in Africa, a venture pre-dating the launch of the BRI in 2013 which has been relabeled, at least in part, as a BRI project.<sup>39</sup>

In 2008, China and the DRC signed the Sicomines agreement, where China funded infrastructure projects in the DRC through a loan to be repaid with mining profits. The loan, extended by China's Export-Import Bank to a joint venture, Sicomines, included a state guarantee, making the Congolese government liable if profits fell

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<sup>36</sup> Shinn, D.H. and Eisenman, J. (2023) *China's relations with Africa: A new era of strategic engagement*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>37</sup> African Development Bank Group (2018) Annual report 2018. p. 4

<sup>38</sup> Malm, J. (2020). 'China-powered' African Agency and its Limits: The Case of the DRC 2007—2019. South African Institute of International Affairs. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27025>

<sup>39</sup> See Huichen, Y. (2024) *DR congo state minister commends Chinese-built Hydroelectric Plant, Belt and Road Portal*. Available at: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/06H25466.html>. and Jing, D. (2024) *Chinese-built road modernization project for DR congo breaks ground, Belt and road portal*. Available at: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/0GUGAQGG.html>.

short. The IMF and Western donors criticized the agreement, arguing that it added unsustainable debt to the DRC, undermining the Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) debt relief process that aimed to ease the country's financial burden.<sup>40</sup>

On these premises, a major political controversy unfolded throughout 2008. This controversy provided the DRC's president Joseph Kabila with an opportunity to leverage 'China-powered' agency in dealings with both China and other international donors. He had been the president of the DRC for two years and needed to demonstrate results to the electorate. The HIPC debt relief initiative and new infrastructures obtained through the Sicomines agreement could serve this purpose.<sup>41</sup> However, the DRC's decision to secure a Chinese credit line, potentially adding billions to its debt, hindered the relief efforts. It became politically difficult for the DRC's creditors to forgive its debt while it was accumulating new debt from China. Western donors, led by the IMF, sought to remove the sovereign guarantee on loans for the DRC's Sicomines mining project. Despite their influence, President Kabila resisted renegotiating the "China deal" until May 2009.<sup>42</sup> Kabila understood that China was willing to make compromises to finalize the Sicomines agreement. Simultaneously, he understood that the IMF and its key stakeholders had political interests in the HIPC debt relief process and would negotiate to ensure its success. Ultimately, after a crucial meeting in May 2009 with IMF Managing Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn in Kinshasa, Kabila began pursuing both debt relief and a renegotiated Sicomines deal, playing both sides to achieve his goals. Malm contends that during Dominique Strauss-Kahn's visit, he and President Kabila agreed on adjusting the Sicomines deal to align with the DRC's debt sustainability, ensuring the continuation of HIPC debt relief.<sup>43</sup> The same year, following a downsizing of the Sicomines agreement and a removal of the sovereign guarantee from the credit line funding the mining operation, it was concluded that the DRC could maintain the agreement and still receive HIPC debt relief.

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<sup>40</sup> Malm, J. (2020). 'China-powered' African Agency and its Limits: The Case of the DRC 2007—2019. South African Institute of International Affairs. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27025>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> See Malm, J. (2016). When Chinese development finance met the IMF's public debt norm in DR Congo. Roskilde Universitet.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

In the decade following the Sicomines agreement, China's approach to the DRC shifted. Johanna Malm notes that China's desire to be seen as a responsible global actor made it less willing to supply "China-powered" agency to the DRC. The challenges Sicomines posed to the HIPC process were unintended, driven by Chinese state-owned companies and banks, not endorsed by China's IMF representatives. Malm suggests that although developing country leaders can engage with China to obtain 'China-powered' agency, this agency is constrained and dependent on China's strategic interests.

## The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation

The FOCAC is the most popular 'One+Africa' summit in terms of the quality and quantity of attendants. According to Folashadé Soulé, it is possible to evaluate the interest African leaders place in specific partners by looking at the attendance of 'One + Africa' summits such as the FOCAC. She contends that African heads of state and high-ranking officials are not only invited to events but also choose whether to attend and how much importance to give them. The level of government officials sent by African presidents to these summits can be seen as a measure of economic and political interest.<sup>44</sup> The last FOCAC before the pandemic of Covid-19 was attended by fifty-three African delegations of which forty-eight were headed by presidents. Comparatively, the last United States–Africa Leaders' Summit in 2022 received fifty delegations, including thirty-six presidents. In January 2024, forty-six African countries participated in the 2024 Italia-Africa summit and only twenty-one sent top figures such as heads of state or heads of government.<sup>45</sup> When comparing attendance to summits organized by the continent's major partners, it is necessary to point that economic weight does not seem to explain everything. The 2021 FOCAC, attracted

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<sup>44</sup> See Soulé, F. (2020) "'africa+1' summit diplomacy and the 'New Scramble' Narrative: Recentering African Agency', *African Affairs*, 119(477), pp. 633–646. doi:10.1093/afraf/adaa015.

<sup>45</sup> See Simonelli, F., Fantappiè, M.L. and Goretti, L. (2024) *The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between equals?*, *IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali*. Available at: <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/italy-africa-summit-2024-and-mattei-plan-towards-cooperation-between-equals>.



delegations from each of the fifty-three African countries recognizing the PRC even though Xi Jinping was absent, and the Covid-19 pandemic was at its height. One year later, the sixth European Union-African Union summit in 2022 was attended by ‘only’ 40 African delegations,<sup>46</sup> even though the European Union is Africa’s most important trading partner.

‘One + Africa’ summits in general and the ones organized by China in particular allow African countries to exert agency. Folashadé Soulé notes that African leaders strategically use these summits and the rivalry among external powers to draw investments by engaging in competitive forum shopping, reclaim their economic policy autonomy, diversify their economic partnerships to lessen dependency, and, sometimes, temporarily break out of political isolation by increasing visibility and expanding their networks.<sup>47</sup>

The FOCAC does not escape these logics. Until the eighth FOCAC in 2021, when there was a drop in financial commitments made by China to Africa compared to recent years, the FOCAC was characterized by important financial commitments growing exponentially since the first FOCAC in 2000. There would be much to say about the evolution of the FOCAC’s content which expanded focus drastically through the years.<sup>48</sup> Focusing on Chinese loans commitments to illustrate this inflation of pledges, we can note that at the 2006 FOCAC the PRC pledged to make loans worth \$3 billion to African countries, this number climbed to \$10 billion in 2009, \$20 billion in 2012, \$60 billion in 2015 and again in 2018 and diminished to \$20 billion in 2021<sup>49</sup> in a context marked by heavy debt burdens and a global pandemic. It is reductive to talk only about loans commitment to describe a forum that today deals with virtually every aspect of cooperation between China and Africa, it however illustrates the

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<sup>46</sup> Stevis-Gridneff, M. (2022) *African and European leaders meet against backdrop of enduring problems*, *The New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/world/europe/europe-africa-summit-eu.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> See Monyae, D. (2023) China and Africa, 20 years since the forum on africa–china cooperation, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* [Preprint]. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.726 and Wang, T. & Zhu, W. (2020). *The 20th Anniversary of the Foundation of the FOCAC: Retrospect and Prospect*. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.64477>

<sup>49</sup> For a quick historic of Chinese pledges at the FOCAC see Cabestan, J. (2022). Chapitre 10. La Chine et les pays en développement : Entre coopération, prédation et leadership. In : J. Cabestan, *La politique internationale de la Chine* (pp. 527-601). Paris : Presses de Sciences Po.

trajectory that has marked these triennial events and the interest there is for African countries to be present at the FOCAC as no comparable pledges are made at other 'One+Africa' summit.

The FOCAC has a significant bilateral aspect. China engages with Africa as a whole through the summit's platforms, making public commitments to cooperation and investment projects. Nevertheless, the subsequent agreements are often negotiated bilaterally between individual African countries and Chinese leaders. These negotiations sometimes occur on the sidelines of FOCAC events. For example, the 2015 FOCAC was also used by President Xi Jinping to conduct official trips to Zimbabwe and South Africa, where numerous agreements were signed. Notably, the agreement to build China's first military base outside its national territory, in Djibouti, was announced during the same summit.<sup>50</sup> Thus, it is particularly interesting for African countries to be present at the FOCAC to advance their personal agenda, attract investments, obtain loans or other financial commitments. More generally, as by attending any 'One+Africa' summit, the FOCAC constitutes an opportunity for African countries to diversify economic partners and to reduce dependency on a single partner but, as we evoked earlier, China is the most important economic partner of the continent and in several countries the biggest trading partner, investment provider, and bilateral lender. There is a need for many African countries to avoid economic overreliance on China.

The FOCAC has also been used by African leaders to voice their concerns and uphold their interests at these summits. As Dan Large notes, African agency is evident in the overall discussions at FOCAC events. These discussions are not simply decided by China; African viewpoints are also meaningfully included in the process.<sup>51</sup> We mentioned before Aissata Tall Sall's call for China's assistance in the Sahel. Before her, presidents such as Thabo Mbeki in 2006 or Jacob Zuma in 2012 voiced concerns in

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<sup>50</sup> See Alden, C., Wu, Y.-S. and van Staden, C. (2018) *Vol 286, In the Driver's Seat? African Agency and Chinese Power at FOCAC, the AU and the BRI*. Johannesburg, South Africa: South African Institute of International Affairs.

<sup>51</sup> Large, D. (2022) 'China, Africa and the 2021 DAKAR FOCAC', *African Affairs*, 121(483), pp. 299–319. doi:10.1093/afraf/adac014.

previous FOCAC and received positive reactions from China.<sup>52</sup> The outcomes from the Dakar summit indicated that, as noted by the African Union Commission's Ambassador to China, the collective African influence on this FOCAC was more evident than it had ever been. This led to all four 2021 FOCAC outcome documents incorporating the African Union's Agenda 2063 frameworks.<sup>53</sup>

Lastly, The FOCAC serves as a reliable platform for African leaders to avoid political isolation, by increasing their visibility and broadening their networks. The only requirement for any country to have diplomatic relations with China, and for an African country to be included in the FOCAC, is to abide to the One-China principle. Thus, every African country as well as the African Union are members of the Forum except Eswatini. The FOCAC is potentially the most inclusive 'One+Africa' summit as, following the principles of peaceful coexistence, China does not exclude political leaders because of their human rights records or because of international sanctions that might target them. While Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Sudan were excluded from the United States–Africa Leaders' Summit in 2022 because their membership in the African Union was suspended and Eritrea was not invited because of limited diplomatic relations with the United States, all these countries sent delegations to the 2021 Dakar FOCAC.

While the FOCAC can be an agency booster for many African leaders it is important to keep in mind that the relation between African countries and China remains deeply asymmetrical. Despite the Chinese government's continuous efforts to portray FOCAC as a partnership of equals, and as south-south cooperation, significant questions persist regarding the extent to which African agency influences these political relations. FOCAC action plans simplify China's relations with 53 different African countries by referring to them collectively as the "two sides". Further, while China has an African policy and publishes white paper about it since 2006 there is no

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<sup>52</sup> See Yamalumba, D. (2021) *ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY AS A PROACTIVE TOOL TO ADVANCE AFRICAN AGENCY WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF FOCAC*, Department of Political Sciences. Available at: <https://repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/83419>.

<sup>53</sup> See Osman, R.M. (2022) *Q&A: The African Union ambassador to China reflects on the outcomes of FOCAC and 'what's next'*, *The China-Global South Project*. Available at: <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/qa-the-african-union-ambassador-to-china-reflects-on-the-outcomes-of-focac-and-whats-next/>.

African regional, sub-regional and scarce evidence of national Chinese policies. It appears that the African side at the FOCAC is yet to balance potentially conflicting national interest to advance a common African position to negotiate with China. Lastly, let's note that the forum is predominantly organized by China and that in 2024, as before, China is choosing who to invite to the forum, not otherwise.

## Conclusion

This short report looked at the agency of African political leaders in shaping their relations with China using China's main foreign policy principles and flagship policies on the African continent as case studies. This obviously eludes the long and deep political and economic relations between the PRC and Africa dating back to Mao's era. Understanding these links is necessary to comprehend the diplomatic successes of China in Africa.<sup>54</sup>

China's diplomatic ties are particularly robust in Africa. This is evidenced by the high participation of African countries to its major foreign policy initiatives on the continent. China's enduring emphasis on state sovereignty and its policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries have facilitated the development of amicable relations with African leaders. However, as we have seen, the adherence of China to the principles that made it success is put in question and it seems that China's foreign policy in Africa is evolving as its footprint on the continent continuously grows.

The upcoming FOCAC in September 2024 is eagerly awaited, as it will either confirm or contradict the apparent shift in direction observed at the last FOCAC, which saw a notable decline in Chinese financial commitments.<sup>55</sup> In recent years, large-scale Chinese loan financing to Africa has decreased. According to the Chinese Loans to Africa Database, 2021 and 2022 saw 16 new loan commitments from Chinese lenders

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<sup>54</sup> See Shinn, D.H. and Eisenman, J. (2012) *China and Africa - A century of engagement* [Preprint]. doi:10.2307/j.ctt3fhwkz.

<sup>55</sup> But not in other forms of engagements.

to African government borrowers, totaling \$2.22 billion. Between 2000 and 2022, the database recorded 1,243 Chinese loans in Africa worth a total of \$170.1 billion, with the last two years accounting for only 1.3% of this total.<sup>56</sup> This decline reflects not only the impact of the pandemic but also China's shift towards more cautious lending in Africa due to debt issues on the continent and changing Chinese domestic, global, and regional priorities.<sup>57</sup>

The capacity of African political leaders to strategically engage with different partners in forums such as the FOCAC to advance their agenda is evident. However, to be able to further its agenda on a continental scale, the African Union and some African countries might benefit from a unified front at summits such as the FOCAC. In 2017, Paul Kagame, noted that “the African Union Summit’s working methods are inefficient and impede decision making and implementation” in a report he submitted to the African Union titled ‘The Imperative to Strengthen Our Union’.<sup>58</sup> He called for a change in the representation of Africa in partnership summits such as FOCAC. One of his propositions was that only a few African representatives would conduct negotiations with China in the name of the continent instead of having every African country on a bilateral level negotiating with China. In relations with countries that have China’s economic size and political clout, unity in negotiation might be helpful to stir partnerships in ways that are beneficial for the realization of Agenda 2063.

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<sup>56</sup> *Chinese loans to Africa Database* (2024) *Global Development Policy center*. Available at: <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database/>.

<sup>57</sup> See Moses, O. *et al.* (2023) *A New State of Lending CHINESE LOANS TO AFRICA* . rep. Boston, Massachussets: Global Development Policy Center.

<sup>58</sup> Kagame, P. (2017) *The Imperative to Strengthen Our Union*. rep. Addis-Abeba, Ethiopia: African Union.

## **About CDD**

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