China's "Bet" on Africa?

27 SEPTEMBER 2024

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In the beginning of September, Beijing hosted one of its largest diplomatic convoys in years; the three-yearly Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summit, with more than 50 African countries' delegates present. The summit adopted the Beijing Action Plan for 2025–2027 and resulted in a wide range of commitments spanning across several sectors, such as infrastructure development, trade, and energy.

Following the economic and political tensions between China and "the West", exemplified by the recent decision by the European Union to sanction Chinese companies, relations with Africa have become of crucial importance to Beijing. Accordingly, the financial commitments announced by China at the 2024 FOCAC Summit surpass the commitments made in

the previous summit, held in 2021 (see graphic). China's President Xi Jinping promised African countries 360 billion yuan (approximately $50.7 billion) in financial support, including financing for 30 infrastructure projects in yet unspecified countries. Notably, the financial support is to be paid in yuan, in an effort to internationalise the Chinese currency and challenge the dominance of the US dollar. Moreover, Xi Jinping also announced zero tariff treatments for Least Developed Countries and a goal of creating one million jobs in Africa.

However, although this year's financial commitments exceed the promises made at the 2021 FOCAC Summit by more than $10 billion, they remain significantly lower compared to the commitments made in the previous decade, as visible in the graphic. In addition to China's economic slowdown, the fact that this year's commitments fall short of those made in the 2015 and 2018 summits can also be explained by Beijing's preference to carry out "small and beautiful" projects centred around high technology sectors, such as green energy. For the first time, China's FOCAC commitments heavily focus on green energy, including the supply, delivery and installation of green technology, but also investments in green technology manufacturing in Africa. Such cooperation provides China with new markets for its green technologies facing tariffs in the EU and the United States and provides a solution for Africa to overcome its current energy deficit, which delays industrialisation in the fastest-growing continent.

Notably, most of the financial commitments made during the 2024 FOCAC Summit are to be carried out through credit lines. This further underlines the criticism that China, as Africa's largest bilateral lender, accelerates the region's debt crisis. Although international analysts disagree over the role China has played in fuelling the issue, Beijing has been criticised for being inflexible in helping the heavily indebted countries. Nevertheless, the issue of African countries' debt was not a major point in discussion at the summit.

The 2024 FOCAC Summit demonstrated Beijing's ambitions for an alternative global leadership – one that would "set off a wave of modernisation in the Global South," led by China, in cooperation with African countries. Accordingly, President Xi Jinping newly characterised China-Africa ties as an "all-weather community with a shared future," which is a title China uses only for its closest allies. The summit unveiled China's efforts to solidify its relations with the region amid rising geopolitical tensions, although it remains to be seen what the ambitious goals amount to in concrete terms.