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China-Africa Energy and Climate Cooperation: Prospects for FOCAC 2024

Xiang Chen, Alex Benkenstein, Cobus van Staden

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Introduction

Green development objectives, deemed essential in both China's Global Development Initiative and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, have in recent years been translated into substantive policy dialogues within the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The ninth FOCAC gathering will be held at summit level from 4-6 September 2024 in Beijing. Climate and energy will be among the key topics for negotiation between Chinese and African stakeholders. China's positioning as a pivotal investor in and donor to green energy projects in the Global South, coupled with Africa's substantial but largely untapped potential in climate and renewable energy sectors, means that there is considerable scope to build on existing partnerships in this area.

The upcoming FOCAC will provide a framework for navigating the evolving China-Africa comprehensive strategic partnership in the post-COVID era. The consensus will not only have to account for current geopolitical tensions worldwide, but also the shifting priorities in China and Africa, along with their respective expectations for this multilateral engagement. This demands a comprehensive view of how Africa-China cooperation on climate and energy has evolved since the start of the FOCAC process. This report aims to analyse climate and energy-related discussions from past FOCACs and the associated side events leading to FOCAC, assessing how these narratives align with Africa's green development priorities.

From Megaprojects to “Small and Beautiful”: Climate and Energy Discourse in Past FOCACs

Climate and energy debates have not always been on the top of the FOCAC agenda. During the initial three FOCACs (held in 2000, 2003, and 2006 respectively), the mutual interests between Africa and China at the onset of the 21st century predominantly centred around high-level political exchanges and social progress driven by economic development. While the Beijing Action Plan (2007-2009) included a dedicated section on “Cooperation in Energy and Resources”, China's commitments mainly reflected an acknowledgment of Africa's abundant energy resources, which remained at the level of abstract pledges of cooperation rather than tangible and specific actions.¹

In comparison, the Sharm El Sheikh Action Plan (issued in 2009 and covering 2010-2012) took a step forward by including a separate paragraph on combating climate change, taking note of the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” as well as highlighting China's commitment to seeking comprehensive solutions for African countries vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. In addition to the climate discussion, this Action Plan also built on the previous version by adding specific targets on energy collaboration, specifically with regard to adding value to African

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2007-2009)*, 2006, http://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/200611/t20061116_7933564.htm

energy products and enhancing capacity for intensive processing.²

Expanding upon this, the Beijing Action Plan (2013-2015) went on to integrate the requirements of “clean” and “sustainable” utilisation and development of energy resources. It delineated specific areas for collaboration, such as irrigation development, comprehensive planning, and disaster prevention and reduction. A similar tendency in seeking more systematic and detailed approaches is reflected in the climate segment of the Action Plan. At a policy level, both China and African states demonstrated readiness to establish policy dialogues and consultation mechanisms. Operationally, discussions revolved around the feasibility of implementing specific on-the-ground projects, including the establishment of meteorological infrastructure, initiatives to combat desertification, and the expansion of training and finance to Africa for disaster prevention and preparedness, ecological preservation, and environmental governance.³

In December 2015, at the opening ceremony of the Johannesburg Summit of the FOCAC, President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech titled “[Open a New Era of China-Africa Win-Win Cooperation and Common Development](#),” through which he pledged China's assistance to Africa in enhancing its capabilities for green, low-carbon, and sustainable development. Later, in a joint statement on the implementation of the follow-up actions of the summit, “green development” was officially named as one of the five cooperative concepts guiding China-Africa cooperation and partnership.⁴

It should be noted, however, that while the language related to climate and energy in treaties and declarations was becoming more specific and nuanced, in reality it was still largely operationalised in the form of mega-projects around the 2010s. During that phase of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese state-owned enterprises took the lead in supporting overseas projects, many of which were large-scale construction or natural resources extraction programmes. In the realm of energy projects in particular, the electricity projects of that time were still primarily conventional thermal power stations,⁵ despite the inclusion of concepts such as “clean energy” within action plans from the fifth FOCAC in 2012.

In the following years, however, Chinese investments in African renewable energy expanded significantly, with these investments growing at an average annual rate of 26% from 2010 to 2020.⁶ While these renewable energy investments were dominated by large-scale hydropower projects, there was a growing trend towards investment in solar and wind power projects. This included

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Sharm El Sheikh Action Plan (2010-2012)*, 2009, http://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/200911/t20091112_7933571.htm

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *The Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2013-2015)*, 2012, http://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/201207/t20120723_8079762.htm

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Joint Statement of Coordinators' Meeting of The Implementation of the Follow-up Actions of The Johannesburg Summit of The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)*, 2016, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367338.html

⁵ Cobus van Staden, 'China's Agenda at FOCAC 2024: Climate, Connectivity & Coalitions', China-Global South Project, <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/chinas-priorities-for-focac-2024/>

⁶ Omolere, M. P. *China's Renewable Energy Empire in Africa: Lifeline or debt trap?* Earth.org. <https://earth.org/chinas-renewable-energy-empire-in-africa-lifeline-or-debt-trap/>.

trilateral cooperation, such as renewable energy technology transfer projects implemented by China in Ghana and Zambia with funding from Denmark from 2015-2019 and the establishment of the China-Africa Environmental Cooperation Centre in collaboration with UN Environment in 2018.

This trend accelerated further after September 2021, when President Xi announced in his address at the United Nations General Assembly that China would stop funding and building new coal-fire projects overseas and proposed developing “green and low-carbon energy” as a new priority.⁷ Accordingly, the [Dakar Declaration and Action Plan of the FOCAC](#) issued later in the year also emphasised the need to upgrade Africa’s energy and industrial value chains towards green development goals.⁸ Similarly, in the 2021 [Declaration on China-Africa Cooperation on Combating Climate Change](#), which is the first separate statement on climate change issued through FOCAC, China and Africa agreed on new paradigms in climate investment and financing, as well as heightened emphasis on renewable energies, high-tech industries, and energy-saving technologies.⁹

This emerging trend also aligns with the backdrop of declining Chinese foreign direct investment inflows into Africa in recent years. During the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (2023), President Xi pledged to promote “small and beautiful” projects that enhance local livelihoods,¹⁰ marking a new phase in Chinese overseas investments. Consistent with this directive, Chinese companies have supported solar panel initiatives in African nations such as Mali, Kenya, and South Africa,¹¹ as well as investments in wind energy and other green investments.

Being the first FOCAC convened in the “small and beautiful” era, this year’s Forum is anticipated to yield commitments that reflect this shift in approach. Furthermore, as both China and Africa have begun to place more emphasis on climate and energy matters domestically and internationally, there is a mutual drive to deepen and expand their cooperation in these crucial areas.

Warming Up: Climate and Energy Discourse in the Runup to this year’s FOCAC

With the official FOCAC this year taking place in the first week of September, several side events have been held by Chinese, African, and international stakeholders since October 2023 to prepare for the Forum. The overarching objectives of these events are to reflect on the legacies of past

⁷ Xinhua News Agency, ‘Xi Focus: China to stop building new coal-fired power projects abroad,’ XinhuaNet, http://www.news.cn/english/2021-09/22/c_1310201218.htm

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, *Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Dakar Action Plan (2022-2024)*, 2021, http://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/202201/t20220124_10632444.htm

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, *Declaration on China-Africa Cooperation on Combating Climate Change*, 2021, http://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/202201/t20220124_10632445.htm

¹⁰ Xinhua News Agency, *Full text: Chair’s Statement of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation*, 2023, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/0C8HP5H0.html>

¹¹ Xinhua News Agency, ‘绿色能源产能帮助非洲摆脱发展困境’ (Available in Chinese only), 直通非洲, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/jK4aB7DJ0xzW0kGCvc3YQw>

FOCACs, to track and update the implementation of the outcomes of the previous FOCAC, as well as to set up the agenda for the upcoming FOCAC.

In general, the above-mentioned pre-FOCAC side meetings can be classified into three categories, namely high-level intergovernmental meetings such as the 16th Senior Officials Meeting convened in October 2023, lower-level government meetings, like the fifth Forum on China-Africa Local Government Cooperation convened in July 2024, and think tank meetings, such as the 13th Meeting of the China-Africa Think Tanks Forum (CATTf) in March 2024.

For external individual or civil society observers, the latter two forms of meetings are more accessible, and the topics discussed therein are more publicised. In this year's local government cooperation meeting organised by People's Government of Guangdong Province and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, for instance, local Chinese and African officials were brought together to discuss the implementation of FOCAC policies on the ground, with climate and energy being among the most important issues. In the post-event [report](#), several African officials were noted for metaphorically "throwing embroidered balls"¹² to China, actively pursuing opportunities for new energy development and cooperation between China and Africa.¹³ Among them, Leonard Mbao, governor of Zambia's Northern Province, discussed how China's upgraded energy industry and high energy utilisation rate uniquely position it to assist Zambia in unlocking its development potential, particularly in terms of promoting diversification of its energy infrastructure and a shift towards low-emission energy production.¹⁴ Similarly, the China-Africa Think Tanks Forum this year also yielded positive results in terms of fostering consultative dialogues. The "[Africa-China Dar es Salaam Consensus](#)" was launched by government officials, diplomatic envoys, and think tank scholars at the meeting. Climate change, clean energy, and green development were specifically highlighted as crucial areas to "strengthen high-quality sustainable development bonds."

While all the events discussed above involve Chinese or African government participation to varying extents, unofficial meetings also contribute to the lead up towards this year's FOCAC. Third-party entities, including Development Reimagined and the China-Global South Project, have held dialogues and produced analyses relevant to this year's FOCAC. International organisations such as the United Nations have also convened meetings to address collaboration in the context of China-Africa relations, as exemplified by the "[China-Africa-UN Collaboration on Climate Change](#)" dialogue held in May this year, which aimed to raise awareness for revitalised collaborations among African nations, as well as China and other stakeholders, to expedite climate initiatives, achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, and contribute insights for the forthcoming Summit of the Future.¹⁵

¹² A Chinese idiom meaning "to express interest in something."

¹³ Nanfang Daily, '第五届中非地方政府合作论坛在广州举行, 围绕产业合作等议题展开深入探讨' (Available in Chinese only), *People's Government of Guangdong Province*, July 10, 2024, https://www.gd.gov.cn/gdywdt/ydylygd/content/post_4453205.html

¹⁴ Nanfang Daily, '第五届中非地方政府合作论坛在广州举行, 围绕产业合作等议题展开深入探讨' (Available in Chinese only).

¹⁵ United Nations China, 'Recent dialogue explores strengthening China-Africa-UN collaboration on climate change,' press release, June 6, 2024, <https://china.un.org/en/270216-recent-dialogue-explores-strengthening-china-africa-un-collaboration-climate-change>

In this meeting, Mr Luo Zhaohui, chairman of the China International Development Cooperation Agency, summarised China's priorities on climate and energy topics as follows: Firstly, offering financial and technological aid to developing nations through both bilateral and multilateral avenues; secondly, establishing arenas for policy discussions; thirdly, aiding developing countries in bolstering their capabilities and resilience in confronting climate change; fourthly, persisting in backing and engaging in South-South collaborations and North-South dialogues.¹⁶ These pledges are not only in line with President Xi's 2021 [Global Development Initiative](#), but also seamlessly integrate with the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which emphasise climate change responses and green development among its focal points.¹⁷

Strategic Partners: Africa's Priorities and China's Commitments

In the review of previous FOCAC outcomes above, it was observed that China's commitments regarding climate and energy matters have evolved to encompass a broader array of target sectors and populations, with the proposed implementation measures also becoming more concrete and specific. However, while a number of those pledges have been translated into tangible policy endeavours that have yielded mutually beneficial outcomes, some issues on top of Africa's agenda, such as critical minerals, have not yet been adequately addressed by Chinese stakeholders.

At the 2023 Africa Climate Summit, Mr Huang Runqiu, China's Minister of Ecology and Environment, framed China's climate priorities for the next few years in two pillars, mitigation and adaptation. China pledged to actively support developing countries in enhancing their adaptive capacity and to collaboratively develop and implement early warning projects within the framework of South-South cooperation on climate change.¹⁸ China will further support the construction of the "Great Green Wall" and the "African Light Belt," and the latter will help African nations to harness and leverage solar energy resources to address electricity consumption challenges and promote green, low-carbon development.¹⁹

On the African side, the continent has been increasingly clear and assertive in outlining its climate and energy agenda. In June 2021, the African Union Commission launched a new five-year continental [Green Recovery Action Plan 2021-2027](#). This Action Plan highlighted five priority areas: (i) improving climate finance, (ii) supporting the just transition to renewable energy, (iii) nature-based

¹⁶ Zhaohui Luo, 'Speech by Chairman Luo Zhaohui at High-level Dialogue on Strengthening China-Africa-UN Collaboration on Climate Change', CIDCA, http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2024-05/28/c_991007.htm

¹⁷ Luo, "Speech by Chairman Luo Zhaohui".

¹⁸ Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People's Republic of China, "生态环境部部长黄润秋出席首届非洲气候峰会," (Available in Chinese only), press release, September 6, 2023, https://www.mee.gov.cn/ywdt/hjywnews/202309/t20230906_1040261.shtml

¹⁹ Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People's Republic of China, "生态环境部部长黄润秋出席首届非洲气候峰会".

solutions and a focus on biodiversity, (iv) resilient agriculture, and (v) green and resilient cities. In February 2022, the African Union (AU) Heads of State and Government adopted the [African Union Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan \(2022-2032\)](#). This Strategy identified a number of priority actions on themes such as inclusive, low-emission and resource-efficient industrialisation, enhancing climate-resilient and low-emission energy and infrastructure systems, climate resilient food and water systems, and climate finance.

The 2023 Africa Climate Summit produced the [Nairobi Declaration](#), which highlights four pivotal shifts: expediting the energy transition and emissions reduction processes, enhancing affordability and accessibility of climate finance, prioritizing nature and people for resilience building, and promoting the involvement of minority groups in negotiation processes to foster inclusivity.²⁰ The African Development Bank (AfDB) set out a similar 2030 agenda with two priorities, namely enhancing universal access to “modern, affordable, and reliable energy services,” and supporting member countries and communities to obtain high-quality energy resources.²¹ Within the Bank’s initiative to “Light up and Power Africa,” special attention was given to two areas, namely renewable energy, which has been recognised for being “clean, reliable and affordable,” as well as power transmission and distribution.²² The strong determination shown by African stakeholders signals to China that the continent is seeking to scale and expedite alternative energy development pathways.²³

Conclusion

Currently, Africa faces a concerning reality: while being the continent with the lowest levels of energy access, with pressing development and industrialisation needs, it is also one of the regions that are most vulnerable to climate change impacts. This dual reality prompts Africa to actively seek opportunities for advancing a low-carbon growth path that is efficient and sustainable, and that contributes directly to the continent’s development ambitions.

Among all the continent’s external development partners, China is uniquely placed to collaborate with Africa in this regard, not only because of China’s interest in climate and energy issues, as manifested by the recent “Green Belt and Road Initiative,”²⁴ but also because of China’s status and capacity as a global leader in the manufacturing of renewable energy products. As a result, we

²⁰ Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, COP28_Letter_July_2023, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/COP28_Letter_July_2023_1.pdf

²¹ African Development Bank Group, 'Energy, Climate and Green Growth', <https://www.afdb.org/en/energy-climate-and-green-growth>

²² African Development Bank Group, 'Energy, Climate and Green Growth'.

²³ Frangton Chiyemura, Wei Shen and Yushi Chen, "Scaling China's Green Energy Investment in Sub-Saharan Africa: Challenged and Prospects" (IDS Report, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, November 2021), 35, <https://africanclimatefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/800539-ACF-NRDC-Report.pdf>

²⁴ Yunnan Chen, 'FOCAC 2024: Three Trends to Watch at This Year's Africa-China Summit,' China-Global South Project, <https://chinglobalsouth.com/analysis/focac-2024-three-trends-to-watch-at-this-years-africa-china-summit/>

might anticipate climate positive outcomes from the upcoming FOCAC, and an increasingly ambitious green agenda in Africa-China collaborations. Ultimately, however, Africa must ensure that it shapes its partnership with China in accordance with its own priorities, promoting a coherent and regionally integrated approach towards a climate resilient future and a just energy transition.

Timeline of China-Africa FOCAC and climate and energy agreements:

- 2003 – [Addis Ababa Action Plan \(2004-2006\)](#)
- 2006 – [Beijing Action Plan \(2007-2009\)](#)
- 2006 – [Beijing Declaration](#)
- 2009 – [Sharm El Sheikh Action Plan \(2010-2012\)](#)
- 2009 – [Sharm El Sheikh Declaration](#)
- 2012 – [Beijing Action Plan \(2013-2015\)](#)
- 2012 – [Beijing Declaration](#)
- 2015 – [Johannesburg Action Plan \(2016-2018\)](#)
- 2015 – [Johannesburg Declaration](#)
- 2018 – [Beijing Action Plan \(2019-2021\)](#)
- 2018 – [Beijing Declaration](#)
- 2021 – [Dakar Action Plan \(2022-2024\)](#)
- 2021 – [China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035](#)
- 2021 – [Dakar Declaration](#)
- 2021 – [Declaration on China-Africa Cooperation on Combating Climate Change](#)
- 2024 – [Dar es Salaam Consensus: African and Chinese Think Tanks on Deepening Global Development Cooperation](#)

Further Reading

SALLA produces a range of open-access research and analysis on China-Africa relations, climate change, the just energy transition and other subjects. Please see relevant links below:

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Jan Smuts House, East Campus, University of the Witwatersrand
PO Box 31596, Braamfontein 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel +27 (0)11 339 2021 • Fax +27 (0)11 339 2154
saiia.org.za • info@saiia.org.za

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