



## Win-Win Green Partnership: China Is Capable, Is Africa Ready?

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# Executive summary

The growing partnership between China and Africa holds considerable potential for collaboration in green development, a key area of mutual interest. As a leader in green technology and renewable energy, China has become an essential partner for countries looking to develop their green economies. Africa, rich in natural resources and in need of sustainable energy solutions, offers significant opportunities for investment in green growth. China has already played a pivotal role in projects such as the Great Green Wall in the Sahel and various renewable energy installations across the continent, including solar, wind, geothermal and hydropower plants.

The recently concluded Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) 2024 underscored the deepening of this green partnership. China committed to new initiatives aimed at supporting Africa’s energy transition, including solar energy systems and broader clean energy projects. This cooperation aligns with Africa’s goal of ensuring that the global energy transition benefits its development and industrialisation, especially through local value addition in critical mineral processing. Additionally, China’s approach to treating Africa as a business partner, rather than a recipient of aid, has shifted the narrative, particularly by involving private and local actors in green projects.

However, Africa must mobilise its own resources, reduce dependency on external aid and ensure that these green initiatives are shaped by African priorities. Africa’s readiness to take full advantage of this partnership is crucial in achieving the continent’s long-term developmental goals, such as those outlined in Agenda 2063. The success of the China–Africa green partnership depends on enhanced coordination, financing and planning on both sides.

## Introduction

‘Kindred spirits, like-minded souls.’<sup>1</sup> This Chinese proverb has been used to describe the strategic partnership between China and Africa, as well as the potential for collaboration on crucial development agendas. Among these, green growth<sup>2</sup> is an area in which China has emerged as a global leader in technological innovation and manufacturing capacity. Africa also holds significant potential in terms of investment opportunities and abundant natural resources. Examining China–Africa relations from a green development perspective reveals complementary advantages and the prospect of a ‘win-win’ partnership, with implications that extend beyond the two regions.

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1 The Chinese idiom 志同道合, which refers to the camaraderie or fraternity between friends. See Hanbook, [志同道合](#) [Kindred Spirits, Like-Minded Souls] (Hanbook Han Language International HK Limited, 2022).

2 Defined by the World Bank as “efficient, clean growth” that is resilient in the face of natural hazards and disasters. See UN Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform, [“Green Growth”](#), December 2020.

With the [2024 FOCAC](#) having drawn to a close, it is important to revisit the status quo and review the future prospects of green cooperation between China and Africa. It is against this backdrop that, on 15 August 2024, the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) co-hosted a workshop titled 'China–Africa Win-Win Partnership on Climate Change and a Just Transition' with the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in South Africa.

The event aimed to dovetail China's green development strategies with those of Africa and work towards building a 'green Africa'. As FOCAC focuses primarily on government-to-government engagements, this workshop sought to provide crucial on-the-ground regional perspectives aimed at contributing to the FOCAC green agenda. As a reflection on and analysis of the outcomes of the workshop, this policy insights seeks to capture key messages and put forward policy recommendations for more pragmatic China–Africa collaborations to jointly tackle climate change and achieve a just energy transition.

## Demystifying the deal: China as a development partner

While the concept of green development may not have deep roots in Chinese society, within the realm of green technology China has emerged as a formidable force. It entered Africa's green industry in a manner that differed considerably from that of the West, with more state involvement under a centralised top-down strategy. This reshaped the dynamics of the sector and the market landscape.

China's dominance has become so critical in green technology industries that any country wishing to develop their domestic green economy must engage with it. In 2023 China accounted for over half of the world's newly installed renewable energy capacity. The country's total investment in the new energy sector reached \$676 billion that year, constituting 38% of the global total.<sup>3</sup> In addition, China manufactures about 60% of global wind farm equipment<sup>4</sup> and over 80% of solar panels,<sup>5</sup> along with other essential green components. According to Wu Peng, China's ambassador to South Africa, China's substantial green technology manufacturing volume and capability should not be mischaracterised as 'over-capacity', as China could support the energy transition across the global community. He said that China had put in place the world's largest clean energy system and remained committed to doing its part in finding an efficient and affordable path towards a just energy transition.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Oktavia Catsaros, "Global Clean Energy Investment Jumps 17%, Hits \$1.8 Trillion in 2023, According to BloombergNEF Report", *BloombergNEF*, January 30, 2024.

4 Andrew Hayley, "Explainer: China's Dominance in Wind Turbine Manufacturing", *Reuters*, April 10, 2024.

5 Wood Mackenzie, "China to Hold Over 80% of Global Solar Manufacturing Capacity from 2023-2026", Press Release, November 7, 2023.

6 Wu Peng, "China-Africa Win-Win Partnership on Climate Change and a Just Transition" (Policy Dialogue Workshop, China-Africa Win-Win Partnership on Climate Change and a Just Transition, The Capital Menlyn Maine, Pretoria, August 15, 2024).

China's commitments have been translated into concrete results on many fronts in Africa. This includes the AU-led '[Great Green Wall](#)' initiative in the Sahel and Sahara, which drew lessons from China's technological paradigms and governance models in desertification control.<sup>7</sup> In addition, China has supported various clean energy projects, including solar complexes in Morocco, wind farms in Egypt, a geothermal power plant in Kenya and hydropower plants in Angola.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, China has also placed increasing emphasis on incorporating high-tech elements into its international partnerships and fulfilling corporate social responsibilities. The [Longyuan De Aar wind farm project](#) in South Africa's Northern Cape province is a prime example. Operated by a subsidiary of China Longyuan, the world's leading wind power developer,<sup>9</sup> the De Aar project is a pioneering wind farm, combining investment, construction and operation by Chinese entities. As the first of its kind in sub-Saharan Africa, the project has served two purposes: stabilising the local power supply and fostering employment opportunities for the community.

In many ways, China's emergence as a development partner has been a boon for an energy-starved Africa. In addition to possessing technological global leadership, China also has a sophisticated and well-developed financial ecosystem. While many of the overseas projects are underwritten by Chinese state-owned banks, its private sector also plays a role in supporting local green technology companies toward global expansion. These institutional arrangements have galvanised Chinese capital to venture overseas and are crucial for China's continued robust investment in Africa's green industries.

Over the past decade, China has invested 10 times more in renewable energy than Europe and has also invested significantly in foreign jurisdictions, including Africa.<sup>10</sup> At the recent policy dialogue workshop, China–Africa scholar Cobus van Staden argued that, by treating Africa as a regular business partner rather than an international aid recipient, China normalised African business and shifted it away from the traditional high-risk space conceived by Western partners.<sup>11</sup> This observation holds true especially for the private sector. While the US and its allies still see Africa as high risk and are only willing to negotiate the risks when the perceived returns are highly favourable, China has been more willing to engage African partners through a de-risking lens.

In addition to its influence on the African business landscape, China has also engaged at the ground level by providing technical training to local communities. A case in point is the [Lu Ban Workshop](#), a well-known project in international vocational education cooperation initiated and organised by China. Lu Ban was a renowned artisan in Chinese

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7 Hu Jiachen and Zhou Na, [东西问 | 雷加强：中国治沙经验如何助力非洲建设“绿色长城”？](#) [How China's Experience in Combatting Desertification Can Help Africa Build the Great Green Wall], *China News Service*, September 6, 2023.

8 "Editorial: China-Africa Green Cooperation Has Strong Inherent Momentum", *Global Times*, September 4, 2024.

9 CHN Energy, "[Longyuan Power Ranks among Top 500 Global Renewable Energy Companies for the 10th Consecutive Year](#)", Press Release, September 13, 2022.

10 Cobus van Staden, "[China's Agenda at FOCAC: Climate, Connectivity, and Coalitions](#)", *The Africa Report*, August 30, 2024.

11 Cobus van Staden, comment made at "China-Africa Win-Win".

history and naming the programme after him aligns with China's pragmatic development philosophy centred on technological progress. In its early stages, the programme primarily concentrated on traditional sectors such as industrial machinery and electrical automation. However, with the introduction of the Green Belt and Road Initiative,<sup>12</sup> renewable energy and other emerging sectors have gradually been incorporated into the Lu Ban Workshop agenda.

A comparable instance showcasing China's involvement in Africa's green technology industry is the Confucius Institute. In South Africa, most of the current Confucius Institutes focus on language and culture. However, the [Green Technology Confucius Institute](#) was recently established at the University of Venda. It emphasises imparting green energy skills, signifying a shift towards nurturing a substantial pool of technical expertise in China–Africa green cooperation.

These institutes and workshops concentrate almost entirely on language or technical training and are not focused on exporting socialist ideology – a common misconception regarding Chinese entities operating abroad. Such misunderstandings only exacerbate tensions between China and the West.

Instead of viewing the various partners through a lens of fundamental disparities, considering their complementary advantages might be more helpful. When it comes to projects on the ground, Chinese and Western developers share more similarities than differences. For instance, Van Staden pointed out that China had introduced new standards for international projects that were largely in line with the World Bank standards adopted by many Western entities.<sup>13</sup> He also argued that comparative advantages usually emerged at the implementation stage. China outperforms the West in terms of infrastructure development and manufacturing capacity, while Western countries still retain certain advantages in terms of project appraisal systems, sustainability analysis and legal resources. The workshop discussed the [Maputo-Katembe Bridge](#) in Mozambique as a case where China and the West collaborated to achieve the desired outcome. In this project, the construction of the bridge was carried out by China Road and Bridge Corporation, while supervision was undertaken by a German company (GAUFF) and the integrity testing of the pile foundation done by a South African company (Geosure). Engineers from over a dozen countries were involved in the implementation of the project.<sup>14</sup>

Another point made by Van Staden was echoed by other workshop participants – for African stakeholders, the tug-of-war between China and the West does not necessarily

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12 The Green Belt and Road Initiative aims to integrate ecological and environmental protection, as well as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, into all aspects and processes of the implementation of the original Belt and Road Initiative. See People's Republic of China, Ministry of Ecology and Environment, [关于推进绿色“一带一路”建设的指导意见](#) [Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road Construction] (Ministry of Ecology and Environment, 2017).

13 Van Staden, comment made at “China-Africa Win-Win”.

14 Governance Events, [‘多方合作撑起“梦想之桥” 瞭望](#) [Multistakeholder Cooperation Supports Prospects for the ‘Bridge of Dreams’] 32 (2022).

imply an 'either/or' choice. Instead, it calls for strategies where African actors can harness the pre-existing relationships and proven skill sets of both China and the West to achieve the best outcomes. Therefore, China should be seen not only as part of a landscape that encompasses Western and local African partners but also in a demystified manner that places Africa's engagements with external partners within a regular business context.

## Sweetening the deal: Africa on the move

Over the past few decades, global leadership in decarbonisation has gradually transitioned from the US and EU to China. Concurrently, African society has shown economic vibrancy and the continent has become more assertive in pursuing an economic diversification agenda. Africa has enormous renewable energy potential, as well as 30% of the known reserves of the critical minerals central to the energy transition. In advancing Africa's role in the global energy transition, it is important to ensure that this contributes to the continent's development and industrialisation agenda, rather than replicating historical patterns based on the extraction of natural resources from Africa for value addition elsewhere.

With 600 million people still lacking access to energy,<sup>15</sup> over 300 million without access to clean water<sup>16</sup> and 900 million without access to clean cooking facilities,<sup>17</sup> Africa faces significant development challenges. While a number of policy frameworks have been put in place to address these challenges, implementation has been lacking. At the same time, progress is being made in terms of on-the-ground implementation and new partnerships. The workshop highlighted two important initiatives – the Africa Green Investment Initiative (AGII), launched at COP28, and the Alliance for Green Infrastructure in Africa, led by the African Development Bank (AfDB), the AU Commission and Africa50. The AGII strives to unlock the continent's enormous green potential through transformational investment, with catalytic capital investments coming from a strategic arrangement of public and private partners. The Alliance for Green Infrastructure in Africa aims to resolve the perennial problem of mismatch and information asymmetry between donor funds and African projects at both the micro and macro level. For this purpose, the AfDB proposed using EUR<sup>18</sup> 500 million (\$542 million) of grant resources and concessional finance to unlock projects worth up to \$10 billion on the ground.

Two issues stood out in the conceptualisation and implementation of these initiatives, namely the involvement of private and local actors, and the opportunities for value addition in critical mineral value chains. It was agreed that Africa should do more to

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15 International Energy Agency, "Africa Energy Outlook 2022: Key Findings", <https://www.iea.org/reports/africa-energy-outlook-2022/key-findings>.

16 Victoria Kwakwa, "Celebrating Water Day: Why Access to Clean Water Is Vital for Africa", World Bank, March 22, 2024.

17 World Bank, "Report: Universal Access to Sustainable Energy Will Remain Elusive Without Addressing Inequalities", Press Release, June 7, 2021.

18 Currency code for the EU euro.

leverage the private sector for energy transition and green growth. In addition, a point of convergence should be sought to align entry-level initiatives on the ground with broader development objectives at the continental level.

During the workshop, it was argued that the recent emphasis on small-scale and private sector projects could signify a new arena for China–Africa collaboration. Moreover, it was emphasised that China, or any other external actor, should not be overly relied upon as a provider of development aid or other financing. Instead, African countries should aim to unlock capital within the continent.

Workshop participants noted that enormous funds are allocated to fossil fuel subsidies across the continent. If energy subsidies can be reduced, a significant volume of intra-Africa capital can be tapped and utilised by local projects. Another issue pertinent to Africa's local finance is the vast amount of dormant funds held in pension funds or cooperatives. It was argued that, if these funds could instead be transformed into productive capital to finance projects, they could unlock massive green investments.

The second issue relevant to the two green initiatives concerns critical minerals, which are key inputs for the production of batteries, solar panels and other green technologies. Africa possesses about 30% of global critical mineral reserves,<sup>19</sup> yet value addition largely takes place elsewhere. While some African countries are beginning to take concrete steps towards domestic processing of mineral ores, most are still exporting unprocessed ores. Advancing up the value chain would retain significantly more value in Africa, with broader benefits for industrialisation, job creation and skills development.

One of the key barriers to domestic mineral processing in Africa has been limited access to adequate and reliable energy supply. In this regard, the recent model of Chinese investment in lithium processing in Zimbabwe, where a processing plant was paired with energy investments to run the facility,<sup>20</sup> was noted as a pathbreaking development. In terms of energy supply for mineral processing, it was noted that more focus should be placed on Africa's power pools. At the workshop, Simbini Tichakunda, Principal Programme Officer at the AU Development Agency-NEPAD (AUDA-NEPAD), argued that Africa's sub-regional power pools need to be connected and integrated into a single system in order to improve efficiency and coherence. Existing power-pool capacities need to be tapped and utilised, and opportunities to interlink those pools need to be pursued.

Africa is currently working on the development of a continental green minerals strategy, while the AU's African Mineral Development Centre and other regional actors are trying to ensure that the region benefits more from its critical mineral resources. However, despite the ambitious agenda, outcomes on the ground have been less positive. The workshop acknowledged the persistent disconnect between vision and action as an enduring

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19 Wenjie Chen, Athene Laws and Nico Valckx, "[Harnessing Sub-Saharan Africa's Critical Mineral Wealth](#)", International Monetary Fund, April 29, 2024.

20 Melissa Pistilli, "[Lithium Mines in Africa: Key Companies and Investments](#)", *Investing News Network*, May 22, 2024.

challenge faced by African policymakers, emphasising the need for transparency and accountability in project execution.

One notable factor impeding action concerns project timelines, specifically the time required for a project to progress from conceptualisation to the start of construction. Currently, the average interval is six to eight years, which reduces the efficiency of project advancement to a considerable extent.<sup>21</sup> In response, agencies such as AUDA-NEPAD are attempting to replace conventional programme-based approaches with portfolio-based project management approaches.

## Deepening the deal: FOCAC 2024 and the way forward

The 2024 FOCAC, held in Beijing, was an important milestone in China–Africa relations. China seeks to engage with Africa on an equal footing, with an example being the bilateral meetings held between China and African leaders at the FOCAC Forum. While bilateral interactions are not a diplomatic routine or requirement in multilateral forums, nearly 50 bilateral and multilateral activities were held over the course of the five days. At the same time, China’s President Xi Jinping called for the elevation of China–Africa relations to an all-weather China–Africa community with a shared future.<sup>22</sup>

As the largest diplomatic event organised by China in recent years, as well as the one attended by the most foreign leaders,<sup>23</sup> this year’s FOCAC brought together the leaders of 53 African countries and the AU. The size of the gathering signals further deepening of cooperation and friendship between China and Africa, also evidenced by engagements in the climate and energy sector. Since the adoption of the Declaration on China–Africa Cooperation on Combating Climate Change at the 2021 FOCAC in Dakar (the Dakar Declaration), Chinese policymakers have increasingly prioritised the green development agenda in China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the country’s Go Global strategy in general.

In the two outcome documents of the 2024 FOCAC – the Beijing Declaration and the Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027) – climate and energy topics were addressed in a much more detailed and specific manner than previously. Specifically, the Dakar Declaration addressed energy and climate commitments in a single paragraph, advocating ‘a green, low-carbon, circular and sustainable way of development’.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, the Beijing

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21 Simbini Tichakunda, comment made at “China-Africa Win-Win”.

22 People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joining Hands to Advance Modernization and Build a Community with a Shared Future, Keynote Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People’s Republic of China at the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation”, September 5, 2024.

23 China’s Belt and Road Network, State Information Center, National E-Government Extranet Management Center, 海报 | 中非合作论坛峰会有哪些看点 [What to Watch for at the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation Summit] (State Information Center, 2024).

24 People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Dakar Declaration of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation”, FOCAC, December 22, 2024.



Declaration separated the two agendas, detailing the specific agreements and projects needed to achieve common objectives. These included:<sup>25</sup>

- institutes such as the China–Africa Environmental Cooperation Centre, the China–Africa Marine Science and Blue Economy Cooperation Centre and the China–Africa Geosciences Cooperation Centre;
- programmes such as the China–Africa Green Envoys Programme, the China–Africa Green Innovation Programme and the Africa Solar Belt Programme; and
- the targets and principles of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement, the Nairobi Declaration and the Declaration on China–Africa Cooperation on Combating Climate Change.

Similarly, in the action plan for policy implementation over the next three years, climate and energy issues are presented in a more pragmatic and detailed manner. In general, the division of issues related to the green development agenda in this action plan mirrors previous FOCAC arrangements, with a few exceptions. Notably, climate matters are distinguished as ‘Climate Change’ rather than being part of ‘Ecological Protection and Climate Response’, as seen in the Dakar document. Energy topics are also highlighted separately under the heading ‘Cooperation on Energy and Natural Resources’.

The Dakar Declaration focused on guidelines for green energy projects, underlining the need for greater electrification in Africa, wider adoption of clean energy, gradual improvements in energy access and sustainable energy development for all stakeholders. This year’s Beijing Declaration included specific commitments from China. These pledges involved the implementation of a unique initiative for clean energy electricity provision, support for African nations in deploying distributed solar energy storage systems and incentives for companies to establish extensive clean energy power projects across the continent.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of climate-centred debates, the level of detail in the 2024 FOCAC outcome document is not markedly different from that of previous years (especially the Dakar Summit document). However, this year the Great Green Wall initiative has been replaced by the African Light Belt initiative, which seeks to help African families without access to electricity to solve their energy challenges.<sup>27</sup> The 2024 FOCAC outcome document does place greater emphasis on multilateral declarations, which reflects the tendency in recent years among China’s top-level officials and policymakers to align domestic or bilateral policies with multilateral processes.

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25 People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “[Beijing Declaration on Jointly Building an All-Weather China-Africa Community with a Shared Future for the New Era](#)”, September 5, 2024.

26 People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “[Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan \(2025-2027\)](#)”, September 5, 2024.

27 Zhihua Chen and Yuanxin Tian, “[China Actively Promotes South-South Cooperation on Climate Change](#)” (National Center for Climate Change Strategy and International Cooperation, 2024).

In his keynote address at FOCAC 2024, Xi proposed 10 partnership actions for modernisation to enhance China–Africa collaborations, one of which focuses on green development. China pledged to initiate 30 clean energy initiatives in Africa, establish meteorological early warning systems and engage in partnerships for disaster prevention, mitigation, relief and biodiversity preservation.<sup>28</sup> The implementation of these projects will align with the ‘small and beautiful’ guidelines proposed by Xi during the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2023. It will also be in step with Africa’s energy priorities to enhance universal access to ‘modern, affordable, and reliable energy services’, as set out in the 2030 agenda issued by the AfDB.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

For Chinese and African stakeholders, the collaborative efforts on climate and energy have strong foundations and show promise for deepened collaboration in the future. While being guided by AU-initiated frameworks such as the AU Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy, FOCAC 2024 is also rooted in the Dakar Declaration, which is tailored to African and Chinese contexts. Building upon and aiming to concretise these broad visions, FOCAC 2024 was focused on the practicalities of integrating the ‘small and beautiful’ approach into both the conceptualisation and implementation of specific projects. The end goal is to advance more inclusive and win-win green development within the all-weather China–Africa partnership.

Over the years, China has taken consistent steps to advance the China–Africa green partnership. It not only ventured into and engaged with the African green technology sector but also fulfilled ambitious pledges and pushed forward sustainable initiatives. With the Chinese side taking a more proactive role, one question ensues – China is capable, is Africa ready? African agency is becoming more pronounced as the continent strives to pursue its developmental vision, captured in Agenda 2063, and advances with continental flagship initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area. However, more is required to ensure that coordination, planning and financing are mobilised to support equitable partnerships that are shaped by African priorities.

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28 People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joining Hands”.

29 African Development Bank Group, “Energy, Climate and Green Growth”, accessed September 12, 2024, <https://www.afdb.org/en/energy-climate-and-green-growth>.

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# Acknowledgment

SAIIA thanks the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of South Africa for its generous support for this publication and the roundtable discussions that preceded it.

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