

The 9th FOCAC Summit: Africa's Emergence as a Pivot Power Amid Sino-US Competition

Moaz Manzoor*

Introduction

The 9th Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summit showcased the beginning of a new era in Sino-African relations, rooted in the emblem of the community of shared destiny with a shared future and responsibilities. The timing of the 2024 FOCAC summit was noteworthy, as it took place at a time when the fault lines of the Western liberal order were substantively altering. Like the West's tacit support for Israel's genocide in Gaza, the compounding war in Ukraine, the slowing global economy, followed by democratic erosion, and the rise of populism in the United States (US) and Europe are undermining the rule-based order. Meanwhile, Beijing is bolstering South-South cooperation under the FOCAC platform to emerge as a global South leader. It is advancing and leading initiatives like the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) to shape an ironclad South-South community emulating shared values, collective development, and modernization for all. The US perceives Beijing's efforts and growing engagement in the continent as a means to deter the Western-underpinned liberal order. Africa is increasingly becoming the next battleground for Sino-US rivalry, as both powers compete to leverage their influence for competing geopolitical interests. In this context, African countries become central to the equation, possessing 30 per cent mineral reserves, immense human capital, large economies, and strategic resources enabling them to reshape the declining rule-based order. This piece argues that the escalating Sino-US competition opens a window of opportunity for African countries to exercise their role as a Pivot Power in reshaping the world order.

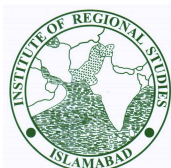
Overview of Sino-African Relationship

Sino-African relationships are interwoven in a shared history of colonialism and a shared development vision for the future. Historical evidence traces Sino-African relations back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD).¹ However, the relationship ended when the Ming

Dynasty withdrew navigation and exploration and started looking inward, ending China's contact with the African continent.² In 1949, their relationship turned a new leaf with the advent of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and later at the Bandung Conference in 1955 under Foreign Minister, Zhou Enlai, who rekindled diplomatic relations with the African World.³ Moving forward, in 1971 China successfully gained a position as a permanent Security Council member based on the immense support from the African and other developing countries.⁴

After that, the adoption of the "Going Out" strategy by Beijing in 1999 led to the establishment of FOCAC in 2003, which bolstered economic, geopolitical, and strategic ties.⁵ Beijing views Africa as an equal partner in security, trade, and investment with a common vision for the future in contrast to the West, which has treated Africa as a white man's burden. Like the West's much-propounded Washington Consensus, a panacea to political and economic instability, failed to bring modernisation, prosperity, and stability to African countries. Instead, it exacerbated insecurity, inequality, and political instability due to their utter disregard for home-grown plans and treating the continent as its agency rather than a partner in growth. Beijing's influence can be measured by the fact that 85 per cent of African states are signatories to BRI-related cooperation agreements⁶, manifesting that a new axis of growth and development is at play. Moreover, as per Gallup 2024, China's approval rating in the continent is 58 per cent, which is higher than the US showing growing Chinese Soft power.⁷ Similarly, Beijing's heavy investment in sectors like infrastructure, energy, and mining sectors has expanded the total trade volume from \$11.67 billion in 2000 to a peak of \$257.67 billion by 2022, rendering Beijing as Africa's largest bilateral trading partner.⁸ Hence, Beijing has downplayed the narrative of African dependency by enabling a "win-win" economic cooperation framework. Under the 9 FOCAC, Beijing plans to leverage its technological expertise to modernise the continent's industrialisation, agriculture, health, trade, and energy sectors. The 50 African countries' participation in the 2024

* Moaz Manzoor is working as an intern with the China Program at the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS), Islamabad.



FOCAC shows how much Beijing values Africa. Through the FOCAC platform, China and Africa are charting a path that is equitable, inclusive, and win-win whereby countries address global challenges through shared responsibility, values, and framework.

China's Expanding Strategic Interest in Africa.

Africa is one of the most formidable strategic regions in the Chinese strategic calculus due to its unparalleled economic, geopolitical, and natural resource potential. The tectonic shift in the geopolitical chess game has recommenced African countries' importance amid the 'great changes' unseen in the century. Like, COVID-19, the Russia war in Ukraine and Israel's assault on the hapless people of Gaza exacerbated deep fractures in the US-led rule-based order. In these circumstances, forums like FOCAC allow Beijing to leverage its geopolitical muscle to enhance its role as a responsible great power and rise as a Global South Leader. Hence, Beijing's growing engagement in the continent via investment and official development assistance (ODA) exceeds the combined lending provided by the Western nations.⁹

As the great changes unseen in the century are unfolding, Beijing is trying to woo African leaders by opening its markets to 33 least-developed African countries (LDCs) incentivising them to become part of the great Chinese prosperity.¹⁰ Likewise, Beijing is walking the talk by putting the framework of long-cherished South-South cooperation into effect by giving financial support of \$51.6 billion of which \$10 billion in foreign direct investment, \$30 billion in loans, and \$10 billion in traditional aid or grants.¹¹ Moreover, Beijing's investments in the continent have grown exponentially up to 114 per cent, reaching \$21.7 billion.¹² Since 2013, under BRI, nearly \$700 billion worth of contracts have been signed,¹³ and almost 200 infrastructure projects have been launched, with most, near completion, showing an all-weather China-Africa community with a shared future for the new era. The US policy of containing China has encouraged Beijing to search for alternative export destinations. Hence, Beijing is employing strategic, far-sighted plans to connect Chinese and African markets against growing European and US tariffs.¹⁴ Similarly, after becoming the continent's leading trading partner, Beijing plans to import \$300 billion of African goods between 2022 and 2024.¹⁵

President Xi Jinping's pronouncement of building "small and beautiful" projects based on the notion of inclusiveness, equality, and mutual benefit with a commitment to build 30 clean energy projects shows the

establishment of an all-weather China-Africa Community that aims to counter emerging global threats to climate.¹⁶

The African countries offer Beijing unprecedented opportunities. They occupy 28 per cent of votes in the United Nations (UN).¹⁷ Thus, by influencing them, Beijing can alter the outcome of votes, maximise its interest, and make its status as the pre-eminent power. President Xi Jinping's pronouncement of "China-Africa relations are at their best in history" is a testament to this fact. Likewise, Africa's proximity to a strategic Sea Line of Communication (SLOC) makes it strategically vital for the BRI Maritime Silk Road. For example, 12 per cent of annual global trade passes via the Red Sea, connecting it to the Indian Ocean.¹⁸ Countries along this route have become immensely important as these states are strategic checkpoints that can alter the geopolitical dynamics. So, Beijing's investment in Africa's coastal regions and expounding GSI under the FOCAC framework manifest Beijing's broader plans to circumvent the waning liberal order by securing access to vital SLOCs that link Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. In short, Beijing is reshaping the regional security architecture by embedding the notion of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security. Thereby, enabling the global community to have a shared destiny in future relations between the global South.

Analysis of Africa as a Pivot Power Amidst Sino-US Competition

Amid the shifting geopolitical order and the overwhelming resource potential, geostrategic and geopolitical outreach, and economic potential, African countries are becoming more assertive in leveraging their role as a pivot power in international forums. The competing geopolitical and geostrategic interests of China and the US in the wake of global fragmentation, have given African countries a maneuver to pursue an assertive foreign policy embedded in the notion of strategic hedging in multilateral forums. For instance, the African leader's participation in the Africa Leaders' Summit hosted by the US in 2022 and their later participation in a summit hosted by Russia in 2023 manifest that Africa is charting a path of its own. Hence, African countries are playing a decisive role in shaping the direction of world order. Africa is reassessing its relationships with China and the US. It is trying to secure as much of its interests as possible while playing a delicate balancing act. Hence, African leaders are balancing relations by adopting measures to avoid being overly reliant on any power and avoid getting in the crosshairs of great power competition. In this light, one can see active engagement by African countries in summits sponsored by the US in



2022 and China in 2024, which manifests that African countries are employing a broader strategy to safeguard as many interests that align with their development goals. Hence, Africa benefits from the competitive rivalry between China and the US. Similarly, this rivalry allows the continent to fulfill its pipe dream of a permanent seat in the Security Council, which the West has brushed under the carpet. The recent pronouncement by the West to grant Africa a permanent seat in the Security Council but without the right to exercise veto power is an injustice and inherent contradiction to the systematic procedure.¹⁹ Hence, one can see Africa's compounding pivot role when South Africa took Western-backed Israel to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) over genocide in Gaza.²⁰ This exercise of Pivot Power by the African countries was a severe blow to the Western interest, showing that the African countries refused to be complacent about the genocide. Likewise, Africa's assertive role in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) shows that they seek greater multilateralism, south-south cooperation, and an end to Western dominance. Thence, the inclusion of African nations like Egypt and Ethiopia in BRICS gives the continent immense representation and leveraging power to engage more profoundly in reshaping the world order. Likewise, internal integration frameworks are being developed under the African Continental Free Trade Area (ACFTA) whereby, African countries are consolidating and diversifying bilateral partnerships to bolster regional economic and political integration. In a nutshell, Africa is espousing to become a rising force to reckon with in geopolitics.

Similarly, the continent is striking vital bilateral strategic cooperation and partnerships with rising middle powers like India, Russia, and the energy-rich Middle East, and is opening new avenues as the rule-based order is

declining. Africa's rise as a strategic swing power is becoming eminent, which could alter the course of history. This makes it imperative for both powers to employ all tools to influence African nations so that they can shape the trajectory of the future world order. Therefore, Africa's rise as a pivoting power is not an overstatement. Actions like the US trying to retain the lost space and China's expanding strategic interest reiterate that the world order is moving to multilateralism coupled with regionalism. However, African nations are seeing these developments from a bird's eye view and trying to secure their interest and long-term development goals.

Conclusion

The rise of African countries as a swing power is becoming a new normal in the wake of fragmentation in the existing geopolitical order. African nations' participation in the FOCAC Summit shows that China and African countries are reshaping their relationships on the notion of a shared past and shared future. As unprecedented great changes and great power competition are gaining traction provides the continent an opportunity to play a more proactive instrumental role in the uncertain future. China offers modernisation, quality productive technology, and a shared future of collective growth, whereas the West sees the continent as a marginal region ridden with problems and conflict. The African countries recognise that aligning with any of the powers will be counterproductive. Hence, hedging their bets on both sides to leverage their position while expounding their role as a pivot power to reshape the geopolitical order. In a nutshell, the upcoming geopolitical realities are reinforcing Africa's ability to swing the balance of power in global politics which is not just a possibility but a new normal which is already underway.

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