

By the Africa Center for Strategic Studies

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African countries seek to rebalance their ties with China toward debt sustainability, value addition, and industrialization to move toward a more equal and transparent partnership that prioritizes long-term African development.



The opening ceremony of the 2026 China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Jan. 8, 2026. (Photo: AFP/Han Xu)

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Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo Member Wang Yi's annual inaugural visit to Africa in January sets the tone for Africa-China relations each year. A diplomatic tradition observed since 1991, the trip is Wang's 63rd visit to Africa since 2013. He has advanced a five-point agenda:

- Accelerating implementation of the 2024-2027 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Action Plan ahead of the 2027 FOCAC summit in the Republic of the Congo
- Consolidating critical mineral supply chains
- Deepening political party-to-party and government-to-government ties
- Expanding security cooperation and military modernization
- Securing African diplomatic support for China's broader geostrategic initiatives at the global level

These priorities underscore a Chinese approach that seeks to align its economic, security, and diplomatic interests in Africa.

African countries' collective policy objectives, by contrast, remain less clearly articulated. To help unpack African perspectives and strategic trade-offs, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies spoke with Ambassador Fred Ngoga, who coordinates external partnerships for the African Union (AU), including relations with China.

WHAT ARE AFRICA'S KEY PRIORITIES IN DEALING WITH CHINA?

Our relationship with China is shifting from a focus on aid and infrastructure toward a more strategic partnership aligned with Agenda 2063 and long-term development goals. A central priority is making debt more sustainable and manageable. While all economies, including advanced ones, rely on borrowing, we in Africa pay significantly higher interest rates, diverting scarce resources from education, social services, and investment. Through the G-20 Common Framework, G-20 African Compact, and bilateral mechanisms, African countries are working with China on debt restructuring, refinancing, interest-free loan cancellations, and currency conversions. Lowering interest rates and easing repayment pressures is surely a win-win—it enhances socioeconomic outcomes while reducing the risk of defaults on Chinese debt.

Africa's debt stock is roughly 43 percent private, 34 percent multilateral, and 23 percent bilateral, with China being the largest bilateral lender. African countries are aiming to secure more concessional, lower-interest financing and avoid the costly loans that contributed to the debt crises of the 1990s. Poorly managed debt, policymakers recognize, can undermine sovereignty and resilience.

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Industrialization and value addition now dominate Africa-China negotiations. This is a strategic issue for Africa—one that takes on greater significance given the renewed global demand for critical minerals, including rare earth metals. African governments are resisting the old extractive model that exports raw materials and imports manufactured goods.

Many governments are encouraging local manufacturing, assembly, technology transfer, and integration into global supply chains. Namibia plans to convert nearly 100,000 vehicles to electric by 2025, and Ethiopia aims for 500,000 electric vehicles (EVs) by 2030 after banning new combustible-vehicle imports. Kenya is now building its own electric vehicles (EVs). The only components they import from China are battery components, with plans to attain full cycle manufacturing in the next few years.

Growing numbers of African countries are assembling electric buses, motorcycles, and public service vehicles. Countries are enacting policies to require more technology transfer from foreign (including Chinese) partners with the aim of boosting local production, incentivizing value addition of critical minerals, and establishing new supply chains.

Infrastructure cooperation is increasingly tied to regional integration under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Agenda 2063, and the Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), correcting past megaprojects that lacked coherence. Across all these areas, African policymakers are asserting greater agency to ensure Chinese investment supports inclusive and sustainable development.

HOW SUCCESSFUL HAVE AFRICAN COUNTRIES BEEN IN PUTTING THESE PRIORITIES ON THE FOCAC AGENDA?

African countries have achieved uneven but meaningful progress in advancing their priorities through FOCAC. At the 2024 FOCAC summit, we placed debt sustainability at the center of discussions, urging financing models that move beyond high-interest commercial loans. China responded by pledging to restructure or cancel portions of bilateral debt and signaled interest in more flexible instruments such as green bonds and blended finance. Moving from commitments and pledges to actual implementation is a process on its own, however, with some countries making more progress than others.



Speaker of the House of Representatives of Nigeria Abbas Tajudeen speaks at the opening ceremony of the Eighth China International Import Expo and Hongqiao International Economic Forum in Shanghai in Shanghai. (Photo: AFP/Fang Zhe)

Industrialization saw clearer gains. Countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Senegal secured expanded Chinese support for special economic zones, industrial parks, and local processing plants. These projects increasingly align with African goals for value addition and job creation rather than simply serving Chinese export needs. Trade diversification, however, has lagged. African countries welcomed China's tariff-free treatment for all AU members apart from Eswatini. However, many countries continue to face significant nontariff barriers in exporting materials to China—including phytosanitary restrictions, cumbersome customs procedures, and weak logistics—especially in agriculture and textiles.

Security cooperation also advanced modestly. African delegations emphasized threats like terrorism, piracy, and regional instability. China committed to additional peacekeeping training, professional military education, and logistics support. African countries, however, are keen to avoid Beijing taking on a heavy combat posture, as the areas of cooperation we seek from China do not require it.

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When it comes to geostrategic considerations, the African diplomatic custom is to seek strategic balance among major powers. African countries will maintain military and defense partnerships based on the value each partner brings to the table in terms of specialization. This is critically important. Here at the African Union Commission (AUC), our strategy is to avoid being pulled into geostrategic orbits and to maintain a posture of working evenly with major powers across the board.

On climate resilience, progress remains limited. Although we reached consensus on green development, shifting from fossil-fuel projects to renewable energy will require stronger institutional commitments in future FOCAC rounds.

WHAT ARE AFRICAN COUNTRIES DOING TO MONITOR IMPLEMENTATION OF FOCAC OUTCOMES?

A major recent development is the expanded use of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). Originally designed to evaluate governance standards, the APRM is now also being used to assess the transparency and impact of foreign partnerships, including those funded by China. This marks a broader shift toward integrating oversight of external investments into Africa's governance architecture. The aim is to ensure these partnerships support national development and Africa-wide strategic priorities, while meeting transparency and accountability standards. At the continental level, the AUC collaborates with Chinese counterparts to monitor implementation of FOCAC commitments.

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However, these joint oversight mechanisms often suffer from bureaucratic inefficiencies and limited public visibility. This weakens their credibility and reduces their ability to influence policy effectively.

National governments have taken additional steps. Countries such as Kenya, Ghana, and Ethiopia have established interministerial task forces dedicated to overseeing Chinese-financed infrastructure projects. These bodies track project progress, enforce contract terms, and evaluate socioeconomic impacts. Their effectiveness, however, varies widely.

Many face challenges, including weak institutional capacity, shifting political priorities, and inadequate access to reliable data.

Alongside official efforts, African think tanks, research institutions, and civil society organizations (CSOs) are becoming more active in scrutinizing China-Africa cooperation. Some of these groups work directly with the AU to provide research insights, strengthen oversight frameworks, and support public accountability. Their analyses frequently highlight issues such as environmental risks, labor practices, and financial transparency—areas where concerns often emerge in large-scale foreign-funded projects.

Still, CSOs face significant obstacles. Many bilateral agreements, including those involving Chinese financing, remain opaque. Limited data access—both from African governments and Chinese entities—restricts the ability to conduct thorough assessments. Despite these difficulties, the growing participation of CSOs strengthens public scrutiny, encourages more responsible engagement by foreign partners, and reinforces African demands for transparency and sustainable development outcomes.

WHAT PROGRESS ARE THE NEW PARTNERSHIP FOR AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT/ AU DEVELOPMENT AGENCY (NEPAD/AUDA) AND OTHER AU INSTITUTIONS MAKING IN THIS AREA?

NEPAD/AUDA plays a central role in coordinating Africa's engagement with China by aligning Chinese-financed projects with continental priorities like PIDA, ensuring they support regional integration rather than isolated national initiatives. NEPAD/AUDA is also expanding into digital governance as China's role in Africa's tech sectors grows, drafting early guidelines on cybersecurity, data protection, privacy, and digital sovereignty, though enforcement remains limited. In education and skills development, NEPAD/AUDA and other AU bodies are gradually improving the impact of Chinese scholarships—a major pillar of the Africa-China partnership—by promoting joint research centers and university partnerships that strengthen long-term institutional capacity rather than only relying on short-term training programs.

WHERE DO AFRICAN COUNTRIES WANT TO INCREASE SECURITY AND MILITARY COOPERATION WITH CHINA?

Africa-China security cooperation is expanding, but African countries are approaching it cautiously, focusing mainly on noncombat support. Maritime security is one area of interest, with African countries looking to China for patrol vessels, surveillance systems, and technical training to help secure vulnerable waterways such as the Gulf of Guinea, the Red Sea, and the Mozambique Channel. This, however, has not interfered with African countries' maritime security agreements with other foreign partners.

China has also provided financial and logistical backing for various AU- and UN-led peacekeeping operations, including in the Horn of Africa, Sahel, and Central African Republic, which supports regional stability efforts. Professional military education (PME) has emerged as another area of cooperation, given African countries' interest in expanding

the technical capacity of their militaries. Beyond this, some African governments are exploring Chinese assistance in cyber defense, border surveillance, and, increasingly, in joint defense manufacturing.

Yet by and large, African leaders remain careful to preserve balanced defense relations with both Chinese and Western partners. As a result, I would say cooperation remains practical, limited, and focused on technical needs. As I observed earlier, an overly militarized Africa-China relationship does not really serve our shared development objectives.

WHAT DO AFRICAN COUNTRIES BRING TO THE TABLE IN THE LARGER RELATIONSHIP?

The Africa-China relationship is often seen as one-sided, but it is in fact a complex partnership in which China also relies heavily on Africa in critical respects. We supply minerals essential to China's green energy, EV, and high-tech manufacturing sectors.

Yet we are insisting more strongly on retaining more value through local processing and industrialization at different points of the value chain. But it doesn't happen overnight. China's dominance in refining and manufacturing poses significant challenges to African economies seeking to break into high-tech industries.

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Yet, progress can be achieved. Africa's first EV battery gigafactory is set to begin production in 2026 in Morocco. Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have created a cross-border special economic zone to attract EV component manufacturers, supported by the African Development Bank and the United Nations (UN) Economic Commission for Africa. Rwanda is pursuing full-cycle EV manufacturing through strict tech-transfer agreements between Chinese firms and Ampersand Energy, Africa's first electric transport energy company. Meanwhile, at least 13 African countries have banned raw critical mineral exports to push China and others toward value addition on the continent. The AU is also helping establish an association of critical mineral producers to strengthen collective bargaining power.

Africa's global representational strength further enhances its leverage. With 54 votes and a strong tradition of bloc voting, African states form the largest voting group in the UN General Assembly, the G-77, and the World Trade Organization. This collective weight allows African countries to encourage concessions from China on issues such as UN Security Council reform and other global priorities where a broad consensus exists, but progress is slow.

Demographics add another source of influence. Africa's rapidly growing and youthful population—projected to reach 2.5 billion by 2050—creates one of the world's largest emerging consumer markets. With stability and sound policy, this young workforce can attract more Chinese manufacturing to Africa, mirroring development strategies China itself used in earlier decades.

Finally, Africa plays an increasingly important international role as the largest developing region, as shown by its inclusion as a permanent member of the G-20. China often frames its engagement with African countries as part of a shared Global South agenda focused on mutual benefit and respect for national priorities. At the same time, African governments have leverage points that they use to shape the direction of this cooperation.

Advancing these priorities and policy choices will help define the economic, diplomatic, and developmental character of the relationship, underscoring that Africa is a strategic partner with its own agency.

WHERE DO AFRICAN COUNTRIES WANT TO TAKE AFRICA-CHINA RELATIONS OVER THE NEXT 10-20 YEARS?

Looking ahead, African nations aim to reshape their engagement with China into a more balanced, strategic partnership. This will be our focus going into the 10th FOCAC summit in September 2027, which comes back to Africa. While Chinese financing and project management have delivered essential infrastructure, they have also created dependencies that limit African autonomy. African governments intend to move toward a co-development model in which they play a central role in setting priorities and determining outcomes. The framework for this has already been laid through co-financing arrangements between African multilateral financial institutions—like the African Development Bank and the African Export Import Bank—and Chinese banks.

A key shift that we want to see by the time we head to Brazzaville for the 10th FOCAC summit next year and to Beijing in 2030 is shared ownership and financing of infrastructure. Rather than relying primarily on Chinese loans and contractors, African actors must be in joint ventures that distribute risks, responsibilities, and profits. This will strengthen local skills, improve sustainability, and prioritize infrastructure that supports local economies—such as industrial parks, logistics hubs, and technology centers—over large standalone projects.

African leaders are serious about accelerating investment partnerships that stimulate job creation and innovation. This includes expanding support for subject matter experts, youth start-ups, and innovation ecosystems in areas such as fintech, agritech, and renewable energy. Strengthening the private sector will diversify economies and reduce reliance on raw material exports.

On the trade front, we want a more balanced exchange based on value-addition. Industrial policy reforms and regional integration initiatives like the AfCFTA are designed to move Africa up the value chain. Knowledge partnerships—spanning education, joint research, and emerging technologies such as AI, biotechnology, and green tech—will further support this shift.

Transparency and governance will be vital. As public demand for oversight grows, African governments will need stronger institutions, clearer rules, and active civil society participation to ensure Chinese investments align with national priorities.

Ultimately, the goal is a mature, equitable partnership grounded in mutual respect, sustainable growth, and long-term shared prosperity.