Pomp and circumspection

Africa's ties to China and the West are starting to look more alike

China's lending is slowing, even as the West is promising more

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WHEN PRESIDENT XI JINPING of China meets African leaders, grandiose claims abound. On this count, at least, the triennial diplomatic jamboree known as the Forum on China-Africa Co-operation (FOCAC), held recently in Senegal, did not disappoint. China and Africa have "forged unbreakable fraternity", declared Mr Xi, who spoke from China by video. Mr Xi painted a dazzling picture of Sino-African ties, saying they feature "sincere friendship and equality, win-win for mutual benefit and common development, fairness and justice, and progress with the times and openness and inclusiveness".

In truth, relations between African countries and China are rather less sunny and far less equal. But they are deep. China has financed, developed or operates 35 big African ports and thousands of miles of roads and railways. Trade in goods between Africa and China, which reached almost $200bn in 2019, far surpasses that with America (though is less than that with the EU).

Infrastructure loans have made China Africa's biggest bilateral creditor. For some time Africans have fretted that China is creating debt-traps by lending too much, or with conditions that may allow it to seize ports or airports if payments are not kept up. But after the latest shindig, many may now worry that, far from lending too much, China is losing interest in Africa.

The aid offered at FOCAC certainly suggests that China is stemming the flow of cash. At each of the previous meetings, in 2015 and 2018, it announced it would provide $60bn in new financing. This time its financial pledges added up to $40bn. These will be spread across some $10bn of China's new reserves (known as special drawing rights) from the IMF, $10bn in loans to African financial institutions, $10bn in trade finance and a target of $10bn of investment by Chinese firms. It also promised 1bn doses of covid-19 vaccines.

The shrinking promises of future largesse match what is already happening on the ground. In 2019 Chinese lending to Africa fell to $7bn from a peak of $28bn in 2016, according to the China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University. This is partly because several African countries struggled to repay their loans and asked China for debt relief. Meanwhile Chinese construction and engineering firms' African revenues have been sliding steadily since 2015.

Yet money is not the only thing that China has to offer to cement its links to African countries. Its policy of non-interference in domestic affairs means it is just as happy dealing with despots as it is with democrats (see Chaguan). It trumpets this by saying that its aid comes without political strings attached, though in fact it expects countries getting Chinese aid to support it in international organisations and to suppress criticism about its own abuses of human rights. Importantly, it promises to treat Africans with respect and as equals. Yet at FOCAC meetings, African leaders kowtow, lavishing praise on China and obeying its demand that they treat Taiwan as part of China, before going cap-in-hand for help. It is quite clear who is first among these equals.

Despite their grovelling, many African delegates at FOCAC were not starry-eyed about Chinese involvement in Africa. Félix Tshisekedi, the president of Congo, argued that the partnership would benefit Africa more if African countries were given better access to the Chinese market. On the sidelines of the event some delegates questioned Mr Xi's promises. "Will it result in action on the ground?" asked one. "I'm sceptical." Such concerns are common at Western-led Africa conferences, too—though China is generally better at actually honouring its promises, says Deborah Brautigam of Johns Hopkins University.

Even so, China's help is now less distinctive than it was in the past, when it was more willing than other donors to finance big infrastructure projects aimed at helping Africa industrialise, laments Carlos Lopes, an economist at the University of Cape Town. These days "it's about Africa as a consumption market," he says.

Even as China's involvement in Africa begins to look more like the West's, Western countries are starting to mimic China. On a recent visit to Nigeria Antony Blinken, America's secretary of state, sounded almost Chinese when he said America had provided vaccines against covid-19 "with no political strings attached". This week the EU announced a $340bn global infrastructure scheme called Global Gateway, which is billed as a rival to China's Belt and Road Initiative, which finances ports, roads and other infrastructure. In June America spearheaded the formation of Build Back Better World, an initiative by the G7, to do the same.

China's ties to Africa are less distinctive and less threatening than sometimes claimed. Some Western leaders may be privately crowing over China's retrenchment, seeing it as a blow to Chinese influence. Yet it is hardly a win if Africa loses not just the roads, ports and bridges that China builds, but also the bargaining power it gets from playing off China against the West—to get a better deal for itself. ■