



Comparative Analysis of External Engagement Frameworks in Africa: The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) as a Benchmark for the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS)

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Abstract

The 21st century has witnessed a radical transformation in the geopolitical, economic and developmental landscape of the African continent largely through the institutionalized engagement mechanisms put in place by the major Asian powers. Among these, the leading institutional benchmark for external multilateral engagement in Africa has been the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), established in 2000, which has mobilized enormous amounts of capital, state-backed infrastructure projects, and structured bilateral dialogs. At the same time, India launched the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) in 2008 to institutionalize the historically organic, human-centered and capacity-building-based relations with the African countries. The present comprehensive study provides an analytical comparison of FOCAC and IAFS, and uses FOCAC as a structural and comparative benchmark to measure the strategic efficiency, economic footprint, governance frameworks and overall developmental impact of IAFS. Drawing on validated institutional data through July 2026, the paper discusses the contrast between China's high-capital, state-led infrastructure model and India's private-sector-led, soft-power and Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) model. The analysis presents a detailed account of the institutional strengths, structural deficits, trade dynamics, debt governance, and capacity-building mechanisms of both frameworks under seven core sub-points. It ends with strategic recommendations for India to improve the operational continuity, institutional agility and long-term effectiveness of IAFS while preserving its unique identity based on mutual empowerment and South-South solidarity.

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INTRODUCTION

Partnerships across the Global South are increasingly defining the global balance of economic and political influence in the twenty-first century. The African continent is at the heart of this change, with the world's youngest population, massive reserves of critical minerals, and a fast-integrating single market through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). In the search for sustainable development in Africa, external actors have established institutional mechanisms to facilitate economic, political and security cooperation with the continent. Two of the most visible external engagement platforms to come out of Asia are the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS).

Founded in Beijing in October 2000, FOCAC created a formalized, triennial, summit-level multilateral format that fused trade, concessional finance, infrastructure investment, and diplomatic alignment between China and African states. FOCAC has turned China into Africa's largest bilateral trading partner and one of the key builders of its physical infrastructure landscape. The institutionalized machinery of FOCAC with its detailed three-year Action Plans and specific mechanisms for monitoring implementation has set a high bar for how emerging global powers relate to African countries.

The India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) was launched in 2008 as a consequence of India's recognition of the strategic imperative of formalizing its engagement. India's approach, IAFS, builds on centuries of Indian Ocean trade, anti-colonial solidarity, and historical migration, emphasizing human capital development, affordable healthcare, educational scholarships, private-sector investments, and soft-power diplomacy. While IAFS has had notable successes in skill development and digital public goods, its periodic, less rigid institutional structure has been a weakness causing operational delays, funding bottlenecks and implementation gaps.

Taking FOCAC as a structural benchmark provides useful analytical leverage to understand the comparative efficacy of IAFS. The study benchmarks IAFS against FOCAC's financial scale, organizational speed, institutional architecture and strategic outcomes to highlight the areas where India excels, lags behind and how it can recalibrate its African diplomacy to remain a preferred developmental partner in an increasingly competitive environment.

Comparative body of analyzes

1. Origins, institutional architecture and dynamics of the summit.

The structural development of FOCAC and IAFS exhibits fundamental differences in diplomatic organization and operation. FOCAC was designed as a top-down highly institutionalized framework. FOCAC, founded in 2000, has been operating on a strict three-year cycle, with summits held alternately in Beijing and African capitals. FOCAC is structured in a clear three-tiered manner, comprising the Heads of State/Government Summit, the Ministerial Conference and the Senior Officials Meetings, and a permanent Chinese Follow-up Committee based in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing. This specialized secretariat works on a permanent

basis between summits to monitor target metrics, prepare detailed triennial Action Plans and oversee project delivery across the continent.

IAFS was created in 2008 and adopted a more flexible, consensus-based framework in its initial years based on the African Union's "Banjul Formula" that limited African participation to representative regional leaders and executive bodies. The format was maintained in the first two summits, held in New Delhi (2008) and Addis Ababa (2011), but the third India-Africa Forum Summit in New Delhi in 2015 moved toward inclusive participation, bringing together representatives of all 54 African countries. But unlike the strict calendar of FOCAC, IAFS has experienced operational interruptions and scheduling delays.

IAFS also lacks an independent permanent institutional secretariat. IAFS commitments are implemented and tracked by India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) – specifically, the East and Southern Africa and West Africa divisions and the Development Partnership Administration (DPA). This administrative structure often results in institutional frictions, slower cycles of approval for concessional financing and limited monitoring of project outcomes compared to FOCAC's centralized machinery. India's flexible approach vis-à-vis FOCAC respects the sovereignty of African countries. However, the absence of a dedicated joint secretariat restricts sustained engagement and long-term strategic execution partnership.

2. Financial Commitments, Lending Models and Size of the Economy

FOCAC and IAFS differ significantly in their operational modalities and scale of finance. China's financial approach is driven by the state through FOCAC, with state-directed capital, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and policy banks, such as the Export-Import Bank of China and the China Development Bank. At successive FOCAC summits, Beijing has promised tens of billions of dollars in concessional loans, commercial credits, export buyers' credits and special development funds. These funds are tightly linked to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), enabling large-scale infrastructure deployment across the continent.

India's financial engagement under the IAFS is on a relatively smaller financial scale, largely based on Concessional Lines of Credit (LoCs) extended through the Export-Import Bank of India (India Exim Bank) and target grant assistance. India had committed \$10 billion as Lines of Credit and \$600 million as grant assistance following the IAFS-III in 2015. This capital deployment has helped hundreds of projects in water management, power distribution, agriculture and civic infrastructure, but the total capital volume in India is a fraction of China's FOCAC outlay.

Importantly, the two financial models are aligned to different strategic risk profiles and delivery mechanisms. FOCAC's state-backed model allows for rapid capital deployment and implementation of large-scale projects, but has been criticized on issues of debt sustainability, asset-backed collateral arrangements, and sovereign financial strain in recipient states. By contrast, India's IAFS lending framework is demand-driven

and strictly respects local fiscal sovereignty. But Indian LoCs tend to have long gestation periods between initial commitment and actual disbursement because of complex bureaucratic approval procedures in New Delhi and tight credit compliance checks. FOCAC is a benchmark for direct financial scale to generate rapid geopolitical leverage. IAFS is about sustainable financial partnerships and collaborations but with less visibility and slower execution on graphs.

3. Human capital and capacity building vs infrastructure development

Infrastructure is a main operational pillar of FOCAC while capacity building is the main operational pillar of IAFS. This difference in strategic assets... FOCAC has focused on physical, connectivity-driven infrastructure. Chinese state companies have built tens of thousands of kilometers of railroads and roads, along with dozens of ports, power stations, airport terminals and government complexes across Africa under the FOCAC commitments. Key examples are the Tanzania-Zambia Railroad (TAZARA), the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railroad and the Standard Gauge Railroad in Kenya. FOCAC's infrastructure focus has helped to address Africa's infrastructure deficit, accelerating physical connectivity and economic integration across regional economic communities.

India's key strategic contribution under IAFS, however, lies in the areas of human capital development, institutional capacity building and knowledge transfer. Under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, India provides thousands of fully funded civilian and defense training slots every year to African professionals, civil servants and technical specialists. Through IAFS scholarship programs, Indian universities have also been centers of education for generations of African students.

Later, the Pan-African e-Network Project, India's flagship humanitarian project, was upgraded to the e-Vidya Bharti and e-Arogya Bharti (tele-education and telemedicine) platforms and has connected African educational institutions and hospitals directly with leading Indian universities and medical centers. FOCAC builds the economic transit infrastructure. IAFS invests in the human infrastructure that operates the public institutions and services. Benchmark assessments show that while Chinese infrastructure is very visible, India's investment in local talent builds deep social capital, institutional trust and long-term goodwill.

4. Trade asymmetries, market access and support for industrialization

These trade patterns within both FOCAC and IAFS reflect the persistent structural asymmetries between Asian economies and African countries. China is Africa's biggest single bilateral trading partner with a total trade volume of more than \$280 billion. But this commercial relationship is characterized by structural imbalances. Exports from Africa to China include mainly unprocessed crude oil, important minerals, timber and agricultural raw materials whereas Chinese exports to Africa are mainly high value manufactured goods, electronics, machinery and processed consumer goods. Although measures such as zero-tariff treatment for Least Developed Countries

(LDCs) were introduced by FOCAC to promote trade balance, diversification of African exports has been constrained by non-tariff barriers, technical standards and domestic market protection in China.

The India-Africa bilateral trade under the IAFS framework, though amounting to about \$100 billion, is a bit more diversified in its basket of trade. India was one of the first to introduce the Duty-Free Tariff Preference (DFTP) scheme for Least Developed Countries, offering unilateral tariff concessions on over 98% of tariff lines. India imports large volumes of pulses, agricultural produce and phosphates, as well as African oil, gold and critical minerals. India exports cheap generic drugs, motor vehicles, machinery, petroleum products and textiles.

Moreover, Indian investments in Africa, by private and public enterprises, are often embedded in local manufacturing, service sectors, telecommunications and agricultural processing. This local approach is very much in line with the objectives of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the African Union's Agenda 2063. FOCAC has recently sought to move toward promoting Chinese private investment and supporting local African industrialization. Yet the sheer volume of state-sponsored Chinese manufactured products still presents competitive challenges for nascent African manufacturing sectors. Conversely, India's sight on entrepreneurship and SME development offers a collaborative and collective approach to local industrialization.

5. Digital Public Infrastructure, Health Security & Soft Power

In the changing patterns of traditional infrastructure engagement, digital public infrastructure (DPI), health security and soft power have become key areas of strategic contest and cooperation. The digital footprint of FOCAC, expressed in the "Digital Silk Road," is based on hard digital infrastructure. Chinese telecommunications firms have built most of Africa's 4G and 5G wireless networks, fiber-optic backbone cables, and modern data centers. This physical buildout provides African countries with affordable, ubiquitous digital connectivity, but it has also raised issues around data governance, cyber sovereignty, and digital lock-in.

India's competitive advantage in IAFS is in digital software architecture, soft power and open-source Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI). India has already successfully implemented the "India Stack" domestically, a unified digital identity (Aadhaar), fast payments (UPI), and consent-based data-sharing systems, and it provides African states scalable, cost-effective, and open-source technology models. India is working with African partners via IAFS to adapt these digital public goods to local governance frameworks, promote financial inclusion, sovereign digital identity and transparent public delivery without proprietary platform dependencies.

Traditionally, FOCAC's health-security agenda has been focused on the provision of health infrastructure, such as building hospital facilities and sending medical teams. In public health emergencies, China's state-led logistics provided rapid distribution of medical equipment, vaccines and emergency supplies.

India's pharmaceutical manufacturing capacities are the key to its health engagement under IAFS. India is known as the "Pharmacy of the Developing World." More than 60 percent of Africa's generic antiretroviral drugs, anti-malarial drugs and key vaccines come from India. This kind of market presence lowers the cost of healthcare procurement for African governments and non-governmental health networks. IAFS, Indian medical tourism and offshore hospital building by private Indian healthcare groups have resulted in deep, institutional dependence on the health system. This soft power synergy, underscored by shared historical, cultural and diaspora ties, provides India a lasting foundation of goodwill that complements its strategic engagement.

6. Cooperation on Peace, Security and Maritime Governance

Peace, security and defense engagement has been increasingly prominent in both FOCAC and IAFS, driven by a growing number of security challenges across the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean. The agenda of FOCAC peace and security has expanded rapidly. Historically, China has institutionalized peace and security cooperation in FOCAC through targeted defense funding, military joint exercises, weapon sales, and counter-terrorism training within the framework of a strict non-interference policy. Today, China has become an important country in terms of the number of personnel and financial resources that it provides to UNPKOs in Africa. Moreover, the establishment of a Chinese military base in Djibouti shows a movement toward direct power projection to safeguard its trade routes, maritime sea lines of communication and overseas assets.

India's security partnership through IAFS is rooted in maritime security, capacity building, joint training, and a shared operational history in peacekeeping. India has been one of the largest contributors of troops and police to UN missions across the African continent for a long time. New Delhi has prioritized maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean and the East Coast of Africa under its strategic vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and its Indo-Pacific strategy. Under the IAFS, India offers littoral African states defense training, hydrographic surveying, patrol vessels, counter-piracy operational coordination, and joint maritime surveillance. While China's footprint in Djibouti is concentrated, India's security focus is on collaborative maritime domain awareness, capacity building for local coast guards, and joint responses to non-traditional security challenges such as illegal fishing, drug trafficking, and maritime piracy. This cooperative defense posture makes India a responsive partner for maritime security.

7. Strategic Realignment: Debt Governance, Sovereignty and the Global South

The political narratives on FOCAC and IAFS are two different visions of global governance, economic sovereignty and South-South solidarity. FOCAC paints China as the savior of the Global South, offering rapid development without any strings attached to internal governance, human rights or democratic norms. Many African leaderships are attracted to the "non-interference" policy, as they see it as a way to fast-track

infrastructure development. But the FOCAC model of high-volume lending has left the recipient states with sovereign debt vulnerable to global macro-economic shocks.

Some FOCAC meetings have in recent years moved away from mega-project infrastructure to targeted development projects, debt restructuring deals and green energy, responding to international scrutiny and concerns about African debt.

IAFS is an illustration of India's positioning as a country of equal partnership, mutual empowerment and shared development goals. IAFS is grounded in clear principles that India's engagement will be guided by African priorities, not predatory lending structures or political leverage. India's support for the African Union's becoming a permanent member of the G20 was an expression of its aspiration to give the African continent a bigger voice in global economic governance.

China's massive capital deployment through FOCAC, India's transparent developmental path, observing fiscal sustainability, local employment and democratic governance. India may not have China's financial clout, but the IAFS provides African states with a vital alternative for balanced, multi-aligned international partnerships, with FOCAC as a structural benchmark.

CONCLUSION

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) are two separate, but powerful, models of South-South engagement. FOCAC's disciplined triennial periodicity, centralized secretariat, state-directed capital and massive infrastructure deployment set a high structural benchmark. FOCAC is reshaping Africa's physical landscape and economic connectivity. But its state-led model has debt sustainability problems, trade imbalances and concentration of capital.

IAFS offers an alternative People-centric model through capacity building, soft power, healthcare, educational scholarships and open-source Digital Public Infrastructure. The strategy for India is to foster long-term goodwill. This is in line with local development priorities. However, the institutional issues such as episodic summit scheduling, bureaucratic delays in projects and lack of a permanent joint monitoring mechanism have constrained the structural momentum of the framework and mired the IAFS.

India can take on board some strategic refinements to improve the effectiveness of IAFS while preserving its core values by benchmarking against FOCAC as follows:

1. **Institutional Secretariat:** India may explore the possibility of setting up a permanent joint IAFS Secretariat with the African Union Commission to monitor implementation of projects, follow-up of commitments and provide institutional memory in the inter-summit periods.
2. **Institutionalize Summit Calendars:** Institutionalizing summit calendars of IAFS summits every three years will help avoid scheduling delays, maintain high-level diplomatic momentum and convey continued strategic commitment.

3. **Accelerate operationalization of concessional credit:** Exim Bank will accelerate sanction of lines of credit to hasten project implementation and enhance competitiveness vis-à-vis state-funded foreign projects.
 4. **Create Digital Public Infrastructure Deployments:** Open-source DPI partnerships in digital identity, payment systems and e-governance will offer scalable sovereign technology solutions for African countries.
 5. **Local Value Addition and AfCFTA:** African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) can be a catalyst for the Indian private sector investments in local processing and manufacturing for accelerated industrial growth and overcoming structural trade imbalances.
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India's strengths in human capital, technology, and digital innovation along with streamlined institutional processes can help foster a more effective, resilient and sustainable strategic partnership with Africa.

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