



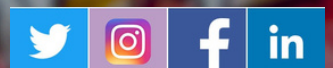
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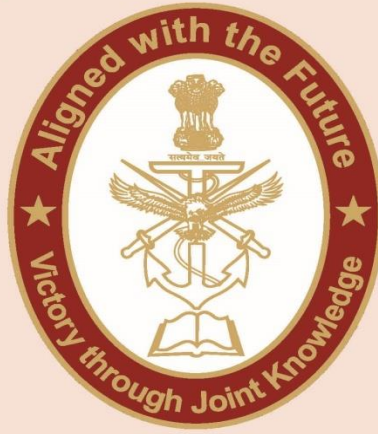
CHINA'S AFRICA STRATEGY AND SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY: INSIGHTS FROM FOCAC AND INDIA'S PATH FORWARD

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Abstract

China's strategic outreach to Africa, particularly through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), has significantly altered the geopolitical and economic landscape of the not just Africa but the Asian subcontinent as well. As China faces its own economic slowdown, its financial commitments to African nations continue to grow, supported by diplomatic efforts and soft power to stay ahead of India's attempt in strengthening Indo-Afro bond in Asia. The most recent FOCAC Summit in 2024 showcased China's pivot towards more targeted, smaller-scale infrastructure projects while affirming its long-term investments in Africa. This issue brief will explore the evolution of China's Africa policy, the significance of the 2024 FOCAC Summit, and what the future may hold as China deepens its engagement in Africa through soft power, economic partnerships, military technology, and strategic resource acquisition.

Introduction

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) represents one of the most significant avenues for China's diplomatic and economic engagement with Africa. Launched in 2000, FOCAC has evolved into a tri-annual platform where leaders from across Africa and China come together to discuss cooperation, investment, and partnership in various sectors. Especially this year is expected to be noteworthy from China as it comes in the aftermath of India's G20 presidency, where historic announcement of involving the African Union to the group has been made.¹ With 53 African nations involved, FOCAC is China's largest diplomatic event with foreign countries. Through this initiative, China has been able to cement its influence in Africa, particularly as a critical investor in infrastructure, industrialization, and technology.

The 2024 FOCAC Summit, held in Beijing, came at a critical time, not only for Africa but also for China, which is grappling with an economic slowdown and growing geopolitical tensions. Chinese President Xi Jinping's commitment to provide \$51 billion in funding for African countries, coupled with a reorientation towards smaller, strategic infrastructure projects, reflects a strategic recalibration in China's Africa initiative.² This issue brief will examine the evolution of China's Africa policy analyzing the outcomes of the 2024 summit which highlights the role of China's soft power diplomacy, and gauging the future strategic moves that China might pursue to secure its position in Africa, especially in light of contemporary global developments.

China's Historical Relations with Africa

China's involvement with Africa dates back to the mid-20th century when it supported African nations in their decolonization efforts.³ During the Cold War, China built relationships with newly independent African countries through diplomacy and economic aid, supporting liberation movements and establishing trade agreements. These efforts paid dividends in the 1970s when many African nations supported China's successful bid to replace Taiwan as the official representative of China in the United Nations, the decisive votes of Africa were acknowledged by Chairman Mao Zedong who once said, "It was our fellow developing countries that 'carried' the People's Republic of China into the United Nations."⁴

Presently China aims to bring Eswatini to its grouping since the king has long showered alliance with the leadership in Taiwan. Taiwan or the Republic of China is considered as a renegade province of China, whereas Taiwan claims to be the “true China” and Eswatini remained absent from the FOCAC Summit.⁵ China is now increasingly attempting to influence Eswatini in accepting PRC or the People’s Republic of China as China instead of Taiwan. Taiwan ambassador to the African landlocked kingdom highlights that a greater number of Chinese people including business owners are making visit to the kingdom, which may be aimed at influencing people.⁶

Over the past two decades, China has become Africa’s largest bilateral trading partner. Trade between Africa and China amounted to \$282 billion in 2023,⁷ with China importing vast quantities of Africa’s raw materials, including minerals and energy resources, while exporting manufactured goods, electronics, and machinery to the continent. African nations have found China to be an attractive partner, particularly because of its less stringent conditions regarding environmental and human rights issues, in contrast to Western lenders like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank. Moreover, China’s massive infrastructure investments, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have been welcomed by many African nations as essential for their development.⁸

However, China's presence in Africa has not been without controversy. Critics have accused China of engaging in ‘debt-trap diplomacy’,⁹ where African countries incur unsustainable debt from Chinese loans, which could ultimately be leveraged by China to gain control of strategic assets, as it did for the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka.¹⁰ Despite these criticisms, African nations continue to engage with China, balancing the benefits of Chinese investment with the potential risks.

The 2024 FOCAC Summit: An Overview

The 2024 FOCAC Summit, held in Beijing, reflected a strategic shift in China’s Africa engagement. President Xi Jinping pledged \$51 billion in funding, focusing on 30 infrastructure projects across the continent.¹¹ However, this time China appears to be scaling down its once expansive, big-ticket infrastructure projects, opting instead for smaller, high-impact projects that align more closely with Africa’s immediate needs.

This reorientation is in response to China's own economic challenges. Post-pandemic, China's economy has faced a prolonged slowdown, with reduced demand for manufacturing and rising unemployment. These domestic pressures have forced China to reassess its international investments, particularly those in regions like Africa, where large-scale infrastructure projects can be costly and difficult to manage. Yet, despite these internal challenges, China's commitment to Africa remains steadfast, albeit more targeted.

China's growing emphasis on 'small and beautiful' projects reflects its aim to refine investments in sectors like agriculture, green technology, and digital infrastructure.¹² During the 2024 Summit, China also reiterated its support for African industrialization, agricultural modernization, and state governance, emphasizing the importance of joint development and shared modernization goals. The partnership, as envisioned by China, goes beyond economic transactions and extends into political cooperation and cultural exchange, underlining its approach to soft power diplomacy.

China's Investment Reflection in African Currencies

A significant development in China-Africa relations has been the integration of Chinese investments into the national currencies of ten African nations. China's influence extends beyond soft power and is now reflected on African currency, such as Malawi's 2000 Kwacha note, featuring China-funded University of Science and Technology, and the Democratic Republic of Congo's 500 Franc note, showing the Kinsuka bridge, built by Chinese engineers.¹³ Even when China is often accused to commit atrocities on its Muslim population of Uighur,¹⁴ it has supported the construction of Great Mosque of Algeria and Algerian government who have acknowledged the support and friendship by depicting it in its 1000 Dinar's notes;¹⁵ and similarly other countries like Morocco, Egypt, Guinea, Sudan also depicts the Chinese supported projects.

China's soft power diplomacy is now aimed towards currency notes and coins since it has announced a massive commitment to Africa's development.

Besides above China's long-term interests in creating a more interconnected and resilient, African financial ecosystem that can act as a bulwark against global economic uncertainties needs a large scale people support. Traditional methods like TV and

other media often being at the mercy of Western nations might find it difficult to promote the Chinese interest, like how RT (Russia Today) is banned by leading platforms,¹⁶ China understanding the same fate for its state run CGTN often referred as Chinese government propaganda machine,¹⁷ has thus aimed towards promoting the Chinese support in the form of local currency itself as there can be no better campaigning method than connecting on the daily used instruments like currency notes.

Strategic Impact of the FOCAC Summit

The outcomes of the 2024 FOCAC Summit will reverberate across Africa for years to come. Economically, China has reaffirmed its position as Africa's largest trading partner and a critical source of development. Politically, the summit served as a platform for China to project its influence and leadership on the global stage, especially as it seeks to position itself as an alternative to Western powers in Africa.

Culturally, China's soft power diplomacy was on full display during the Summit. China's vision of a "shared future" with Africa is not just about economic cooperation; it is about fostering a sense of solidarity between China and Africa as fellow victims of Western imperialism. This narrative, reiterated throughout the summit's events, resonates with many African leaders who view China as a partner that respects their sovereignty and offers a counterbalance to Western dominance.

China's efforts to blend economic aid with cultural diplomacy highlights its nuanced approach to gaining influence in Africa. By providing financial assistance without the strings attached that often accompany Western aid, China presents itself as a more attractive and reliable partner for African nations. This has the added effect of enhancing China's soft power, allowing it to build long-term alliances that extend beyond transactional relationships. The hidden agenda of China has been deliberately put under wraps for the moment.

Future Prospects and Strategic Moves

While China's economic investments and soft power diplomacy have already reshaped its relationship with Africa, the future holds even more strategic opportunities for China

to expand its influence. One of the key areas where China is likely to increase its involvement is in security and military cooperation. The departure of Russia's Wagner mercenaries from regions like the Sahel has created a security vacuum. China could step in to fill this gap, either through direct military engagement or by providing security assistance to African nations. Wagner mercenaries have been instrumental in providing security services in various African countries, particularly in regions like the Sahel, where insurgency and terrorism remain rampant. As the Wagner group pulls back, China may see an opportunity to step in, either by offering security assistance or by providing military personnel.

The Africa Corps (TAC),¹⁸ a mercenary group raised in the Sahel is being referred as a African entity of Russian group Wagner which might also see large number of former People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers joining which can help in getting rid of Wagner tag and also overcome the logistics and manpower crisis it has developed since majority of Russian fighters are now being pulled back to fight on the Ukraine front.

As security concerns in the Sahel and other parts of Africa intensify, China may leverage its growing influence to offer military technology, training, and even troops to support local government administration including traffic, law and order. Deploying Chinese security forces would serve a dual purpose: protecting China's investments and ensuring that African nations remain aligned with Beijing's strategic objectives with its economic interests. As the presence of Chinese soldiers in Africa could also act as a safeguard for China's infrastructure investments and businesses operating in conflict-prone areas. China has gradually expanded its military footprint in Africa, notably after establishing its first overseas military base in Djibouti.¹⁹

Additionally, China is expected to capitalize on Africa's increasing demand for military technology. As African nations seek alternatives to traditional Western and Russian arms suppliers, China is well-positioned to fill the void. By promoting its military technologies, China can further cement its role firstly as a key partner in Africa's security landscape, and later on in acting as a mediator in sorting disputes between African nations who are presently at war in the region.

Beyond military cooperation, China's interests in Africa's mineral wealth will also shape its future actions. China already imports a significant portion of Africa's natural

resources, including cobalt, lithium, and various rare earth elements essential for its technology sector.²⁰ As global demand for these materials grow—especially with the rise of green technologies like electric vehicles, materials that are essential for China’s rapidly growing tech and renewable energy sectors —China is likely to strengthen its investments in Africa's mining and resource extraction industries. The above actions or steps can also further ease China’s effort to acquire strategic mineral from mineral rich nations like Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Zambia, while offering financial support to build the underdeveloped infrastructure in these countries.

While China has already invested in Africa’s mining sector, few big announcements can be expected to stay ahead in the global resource competition, and it will also be expected to include its academia pool as one of the non-traditional sectors like that of emerging technologies, techno-agriculture, and fin-tech. As African countries modernize their economies, they will require updated digital infrastructure and innovative solutions in agricultural technology to meet the challenges of a rapidly growing population. China, having invested heavily in its domestic tech sectors, could offer affordable, scalable technological solutions to African nations, further tightening its influence in emerging industries across the continent. China's role in financial technology (fintech) and digital payment systems will likely expand as well, as it seeks to integrate Africa more closely into its global economic network. China would like to consider on priority over other areas of collaboration as its Asian competitor India also stands as a very strong contender in sharing the technology with its African friends post the historic declaration of including African Union in the G20 nations.

Another area where China is expected to expand its involvement is in Africa’s transportation infrastructure. With several large-scale projects already underway, including railways, highways, and ports, China’s investment in transportation is designed to facilitate trade and movement of goods across the continent. These infrastructure developments also align with China’s highly ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to create a global network of trade routes that connect Asia, Africa, and Europe.²¹

These moves, coupled with China's strategic military and economic engagement, will solidify its position as a long-term partner for African countries in their quest for modernisation and development, while also countering the influence of rival powers.

Contemporary Geopolitical Context

The ongoing conflicts across globe is impacting the global geopolitical landscape, with the Russia-Ukrainian conflict now swinging on either side with each passing day. The increased straining of relations between US and China and it's expanding theatres of competition, China's future plannings about Africa are set to witness a huge change. The unprecedented withdrawal of Russia's mercenary force Wagner from Africa for supporting its unexpected loss resulting in involving North Korea for troops under the special military agreement in Pyongyang is the pointer to the future direction.²²

China aims to fill the vacuum, reinforcing its military presence and positioning itself as a regional powerhouse. Since China holds potential to offer cheap and highly affordable alternatives compared to Western utilities in terms of growth and development, which can even include payment in form of leasing of ports in if an African country is devoid of finance.

China's economic and other resources being offered to Africa also paves pre-emptive way of voicing its views in the broad view of multi-polar world being promoted by Russia's President Putin. It will also thus be of Russia's need to ensure having less dispute of opinion with China in order to have support from African nations at large in a multi-polar discussion. Thus this strategy will not only strengthen China's global position and dominance but go beyond balancing the influence of traditional Western powers.

India's Path Forward: Strengthening Engagement in Africa amid Strategic Rivalry

India's engagement with African nations remains very deep rooted and is based on the principles of trust and mutual respect, focusing largely on people-to-people relations than that of political engagement. India has granted e-Visa facilities to 33 African countries and opened several new diplomatic Missions. In keeping with our spirit of 'Vasudaiva Kutumbakam', that the World is a family, India has also been at the forefront to provide capacity-building and training to African candidates under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme. Almost 40,000 Africans have been trained in India under ITEC in the last 10 years.²³ India has also launched the second phase of the tele-education and tele-medicine projects. India has

also attempted promoting its education system in Africa by opening the country's premier institutions like The Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IIT-M)'s first overseas campus in Zanzibar (Tanzania) and the Gujarat based National Forensic Science University (NFSU) in Uganda.²⁴ The commitment towards Africa has been on priority by all governments in power in India. India has completed over 206 projects in 43 African countries many other projects are being undertaken by offering concessional loans with a total outlay of over US\$ 12.37 billion.²⁵ India remains the fourth largest trading partner for Africa which is expected to rise with the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA) in place.²⁶ India's support to Africa through duty-free tariff preference (DFTP) scheme granted non-reciprocal duty-free market access is benefitting African businesses. During COVID-19 pandemic, medical aid and emergency kits of 150 tonnes was provided to 32 countries in Africa under the 'Vaccine Maitri' initiative besides handing over advanced medical equipment, ambulances and cancer treatment machines.²⁷

Under Humanitarian relief India has provided relief material to countries hit by natural disasters whether it is Zambia, Malawi, Kenya or Mozambique. Additionally, India also has a very cordial defence relationship as it provides training to several African military officers in its prestigious military training institutions like Officer Training Academy (OTA). Additionally India has also contributed to the setting up of Defence Academies and Colleges in Nigeria, in Ethiopia and Tanzania.²⁸

India's interests towards Africa remains multifold where it is not just for balancing, China's growing influence but also through its commitment of Prime Minister Modi's statement "India's priority is not just Africa; India's priority is Africans – every man, woman and child in Africa". China's flagship initiative for Africa the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) aimed towards strengthening foothold in Africa mandates India in strengthening ties with Africa with focus on ensuring sustainable growth for all. It is a matter of time as to when India announces for hosting annual India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) which was first held in 2008, which only happened twice, in 2011 and 2015 at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and New Delhi respectively. It is almost a decade now as the need for the Summit remains crucial than ever before. Additionally, the Voice of the Global South Summit (VOGSS) hosted by India also needs more active engagement as it hosts representation from all African countries.

As India's goals align with that of Western nations in countering China's balance, it remains a decisive player with options for support from Western nations or multilateral organisations which remain accessible especially with the cost involved in hosting such a grand event.

Recommendations for India's Strategic Moves in Africa:

- **Strengthening the Historical Ties:** Strengthen India's engagement by highlighting historical solidarity, such as India's support for African independence movements, and capitalize on shared democratic values. India's diaspora ties with Africa are way stronger than that of China, with many prominent African leaders tracing their roots to India, like the seventh President of Mauritius Prithvirajsing Roopun, Mauritian politician Pravind Kumar Jugnauth, the ninth President of Suriname Chandrikapersad 'Chan' Santokhi, and many more.²⁹
- **Expand Educational Diplomacy:** Offer more scholarships focused on technical education, and vocational training programs for African students and professionals, which will enhance India's soft power diplomacy.
- **Collaborative Infrastructure Projects:** Partner with African nations on joint infrastructure ventures, focusing on health, education, and digital connectivity, using India's expertise in these fields.
- **Enhance Military and Security Cooperation:** Consider increasing military training programs and defence cooperation, especially in number of joint military exercises. Existing AFINDEX involving tri-services, to counterbalance China's growing military presence is essential. Inviting all African nations to join AFINDEX will be positive development as not all of 54 African Union member nations are part of it.³⁰
- **Promote Sustainable Development:** Advocate for environmentally sustainable development projects that align with Africa's long-term goals, offering an alternative to China's often criticized "debt-trap" diplomacy.

- India's 'Know India Program' showcasing India's strength in Manufacturing & Services sector, should be customised to emphasise defence industries on high priority.³¹ Additionally tie up with leading private universities across the country needs to be considered as roots of the diaspora are not exclusive to Delhi but mostly from across the country with southern states accounting for a huge chunk.
- Increasing support to the India-Africa Business Conclave, as the skills of India are reflected through One District One Product (ODOP) initiative. It can apply same for One Nation One Product (AU-ONOP) for the African union members. This will foster balanced gross development across the countries in the Africa. This effort will also help in better people collaboration through startup and other joint ventures.
- Taking exclusive governmental initiatives like announcing bilateral commemoration stamps related to each member nations of African Union marking a mutual respect and granting space for establishing African Union's permanent office in national capital can go a long way.
- India's stand behind African Union's reformation in United Nations via 'Ezulwini Consensus' and the 'Sirte Declaration' are also testimonial of India's support to the union and staying firm to its commitment to the Voice of Global South, which can also be promoted in joint activities here in India undertaking joint researches between leading research agencies.
- India can offer its highly expertised skills in space as the African space industry is still in nascent stages where the African Space Agency (AfSA) was incorporated only in 2023, and still collaborates closely with the European Space Agency (ESA). Since India holds distinction of making the lowest budget landing on moon,³² it can share with Africa and train its scientists for shared themes including that of weather forecasting and communications.
- As India's success with digital payment flies high, it can share the principles, technologies, and functionality of India-Stack, a collective term involving UPI and Aadhar like systems and training people to use it, for more acceptability.

The promotion of digital payment will certainly counter the Chinese efforts of reflecting printing money through its funded infrastructures to a far extent.

Conclusion

FOCAC Summit remains one of the major efforts from China towards strengthening relations with Africa, making it highly significant move in this evolving nature of international diplomacy and trade relations. The summit reflecting China's commitment to Africa major announcements aimed at regional advancements. The reflection of Chinese invested or aided projects on African currencies are success of the soft power projections but it's future moves are likely to increase its military and security presence which will aid in promoting its budget friendly military technologies and grant secure access to critical resources.

China may soon also break the deal to deploy North Korean military troops akin to a mercenary replacing Wagner mercenaries avoiding direct involvement on the international stage.

As India remains one of the key players in the global politics, it is important that India calibrates its relations with Africa on priority and makes it a more progressive model in coming time to show case as how emerging powers can reshape global international relationships and contribute to the development of strategic partnerships. India and Africa having 1.4 billion population largely comprising youths can play significant role in shaping world's geopolitical landscape.

DISCLAIMER

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