

28-02-2026

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To cite this article: Khatimah, A. R. (2026). The role of FOCAC as institutional framework for China's belt and road initiative projects in Ethiopia. *Priviet Social Sciences Journal*, 6(2), 754-764.
<https://doi.org/10.55942/pssj.v6i2.1468>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.55942/pssj.v6i2.1468>



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The role of FOCAC as institutional framework for China's belt and road initiative projects in Ethiopia

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Received 21 December 2025

Revised 20 January 2026

Accepted 28 February 2026

ABSTRACT

When international relations have traditionally been shaped by hegemonic power politics that prioritize dominance over equality and mutual benefit, China–Africa relations have emphasized the principles of win–win cooperation institutionalized through the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) since 2000. As a multilateral platform, FOCAC facilitates collective consultation and cooperation and has gained greater significance since the launch of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project in 2013 as a mechanism for aligning Chinese initiatives with African development agendas. Interestingly, the agenda of FOCAC 2024 has shifted from a dominant focus on large-scale infrastructure toward more sustainable, socially oriented, and norm-driven cooperation, as a response to international criticism of the debt and the effectiveness of mega-infrastructure projects in some African states. Thus, this article analyzes the current role of FOCAC in the implementation of the BRI in Ethiopia, which has emerged as a key partner. Although several studies acknowledge FOCAC as a coordination platform, limited research systematically examines its institutional role in structuring cooperation between states. Using neoliberal institutionalism, this study argues that FOCAC reduces uncertainty, facilitates long-term cooperation, and shapes state behavior through repeated interactions, action plans, and reputational considerations. The findings demonstrate that despite its formal status as a diplomatic forum, FOCAC increasingly functions as a quasi-institution in stabilizing China–Ethiopia cooperation. However, the sustainability of this cooperation depends on China's ability to generate tangible developmental benefits without exacerbating debt burdens or reinforcing structural asymmetries.

Keywords: China's belt and road initiative; FOCAC; neoliberal institutionalism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of foreign relations, China and Africa have confirmed the principles of equality and mutual assistance, which denotes a new trend in the development of international relations. This realization of the commitment can be seen through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Since its establishment in 2000, FOCAC has become a platform and multilateral mechanism for China and African countries to conduct collective consultations and carry out pragmatic cooperation. FOCAC has reshaped the paradigm of international cooperation with China and demonstrated another policy and development model for cooperation with Africa, where China offered African countries a new type of partnership. The partnership is under the slogan “building a new type of international relations with win-win cooperation” (Aiping & Zhan, 2018, p. 99).

Responding the heated issue, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) coined by President of China, Xi Jinping in 2013, the Ambassador of China to Nigeria affirmed that FOCAC will stand as a major platform for Belt and Road Initiative. In fact, during the FOCAC Beijing Summit in 2018, both China and Africa decided to launch the theme “The Joint Construction of the Belt and Road between China and Africa,” the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations, and the agenda 2063 of the African Union. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was presented as a framework intended to align participating countries’ development strategies and complementary advantages in order to promote high-quality and sustainable development through extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits. In addition, the next Beijing Summit in 2024 indicates a significant evolution in China–Africa relations as a response to international criticism regarding debt sustainability and the effectiveness of mega-infrastructure projects. It commits to simultaneously cooperating more closely with African development priorities. As a result, while earlier phases of FOCAC and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emphasized large-scale infrastructure projects, recent policy directions demonstrate a strategic shift toward more targeted, sustainable, and socially oriented cooperation. China is increasingly promoting “small but beautiful” projects that are smaller in scale but designed to generate immediate and tangible benefits for local communities.

Notably, Ethiopia has become the first beneficiary of the initiative, more than any other African nation. This can be seen by the construction of Addis Ababa-Djibouti rail link in 2018 as the first and one of the long-term development projects with China. Costantinos Bt. Costantinos, who served as an economic advisor to the African Union (AU) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), stated that the industrial parks, new airports, and potentially Eritrean ports that are now accessible to Ethiopia can further benefit from the initiative (Xinhua, 2019b).

In line with existing debates in International Relations, this article is situated within the broader academic discussion on alternative models of international cooperation that move beyond hegemonic and power-based approaches. Many previous studies on China–Africa relations and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have largely focused on China’s economic diplomacy, infrastructure financing, and strategic interests in Africa, and several scholars have examined the BRI as an instrument of China’s global economic expansion, while others have highlighted its implications for development and dependency in African countries. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the institutional mechanisms that facilitate and sustain such cooperation, particularly the role of FOCAC as a coordinating platform in structuring cooperation through norms, monitoring arrangements, and reputational incentives, between China and African states, especially Ethiopia. In addition, empirical applications of neoliberal institutionalism to China–Africa engagement remain underdeveloped, particularly in single-country case studies that move beyond financial flows and infrastructure outputs to examine institutional mechanisms and behavioral effects.

Thus, to address theoretical and contextual gaps, this study investigates the role of FOCAC in implementing BRI in Ethiopia as a case study, analyzing neoliberal-institutionalism theory by Robert Keohane. From a neoliberal-institutionalism perspective, this study analyzes the role of international institutions in reducing uncertainty, facilitating cooperation, and shaping state behavior through norms, rules, and reputational incentives. This study also examines the behavior of China and Ethiopia, which is

driven by rational calculations of their long-term cooperative interests in FOCAC and how both parties maintain compliance and a good reputation to achieve their long-term interests. In addition, the finding reveals that although FOCAC is only a forum, but it also plays important role as an institution to set values, action plans, and agreements in the realization of BRI projects. Furthermore, the interaction between China and Ethiopia within FOCAC reflects rational calculations of long-term mutual interests, in which both parties seek to maintain compliance and a positive reputation to secure sustainable cooperation and mutual gains.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article uses a qualitative research design to analyze the institutional role of the FOCAC in facilitating the implementation of the BRI in Ethiopia by examining the complexity of institutional dynamics, state interaction, and long-term cooperation. Using the theoretical framework of neoliberal institutionalism, this article emphasizes the role of institutions in reducing uncertainty, promoting transparency, and shaping state behavior through norms, rules, and reputational incentives. Neoliberal institutionalism has become one of the most influential approaches to regionalism because it combines elements of neorealism and neoliberalism, particularly in explaining how institutions help states overcome collective action problems and reduce uncertainty, as argued by Robert Keohane and Edward Mansfield. Compared to other approaches, it provides a stronger explanation of the interaction between politics and economics, arguing that state behavior is shaped by the constraints of global markets and the principles of neoclassical economics (Söderbaum, 2004).

In addition, this study employs a single case study method, focusing on Ethiopia as a key partner in both FOCAC and the BRI, covering the period from 2018, when the BRI agreement was signed, to 2025 during its implementation phase. Ethiopia was selected because of its strategic importance in China–Africa relations and its extensive engagement in infrastructure, industrialization, and economic cooperation projects. The case study approach enables an in-depth exploration of how institutional mechanisms operate in practice and how cooperation evolves over time through an examination of Ethiopia’s development trajectory and policy alignment with Chinese initiatives, particularly after the integration of BRI into the FOCAC agenda, by analyzing the summits, action plans, monitoring mechanisms, and follow-up committees, which influence policy coordination and cooperation outcomes. This approach helps identify causal mechanisms linking institutional interaction to long-term cooperation and mutual gains. In addition, this study uses secondary data. The data were collected from official government documents, FOCAC declarations, action plans, policy reports, academic journal articles, and publications from international organizations and research institutions. Through a systematic and coherent research design, this study aims to contribute to the literature on institutional cooperation and provide a deeper understanding of how international institutions shape development partnerships in the Global South (see Figure 1).

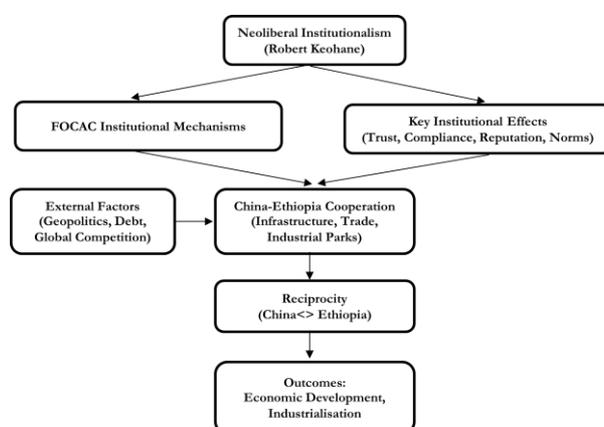


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: The Role of FOCAC as Institutional Framework for China’s Belt and Road Initiative Projects in Ethiopia

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Long Term-Cooperative Interest

From a liberalist perspective, the establishment of the Forum on China – Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) can be seen as a platform to gain mutual benefits between China and the 53 African states. Through the comprehensive economic cooperation agenda advanced under China–Africa cooperation frameworks, especially the 2018 Beijing Summit of FOCAC and the Beijing Action Plan (2019–2021), China and African states, including Ethiopia, were expected to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation and generate positive development outcomes ([Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2018](#)). For future development, China offers the BRI, which refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road as an alternative development and platform for international cooperation. The Chinese Ambassador stated:

“We are working closely with Ethiopia in advancing the Belt and Road Initiative. Ethiopia is a very important partner in this regard. We have been doing a lot of projects here in Ethiopia -- infrastructure, policy dialogue, trade, financing and people-to-people exchanges. We want to draw ideas from think-tanks, businesses and the government,” ([Xinhua, 2019b](#)).

Compared with western countries, BRI projects do not impose strict development standards or requirements, unlike those provided by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. China has often framed the BRI and its Africa engagement through the language of non-interference and South–South cooperation, presenting itself as different from Western development partners, even as critics have debated issues such as debt dependence and “debt-trap” narratives ([Asante, 2018](#); [Carmody, 2022](#)). This means that instead of upholding the idea of a rule-based order, China comes with a strategy to spread its soft influence, especially in FOCAC meetings to be followed by other countries as a lesson learned. Responding the offer, the Former Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Hailemariam, said that the cooperation with China has been very instrumental in agriculture development and transformation, and in the cooperation, China will give many lessons ([Xinhua, 2019b](#)).

3.2. Maintaining Gain by Complying with The Regime’s Rule

China’s presence in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, cannot be separated from its active engagement and cooperation within the framework of FOCAC. Since 2002, China and Africa have agreed to maximize the role of FOCAC and have established joint follow-up mechanisms to conduct regular evaluations on the implementation of follow-up actions. Until now, both parties have strengthened the effectiveness of these mechanisms at three levels: the Ministerial Conference, which is held every three years; the Senior Officials Follow-up Meeting and the Senior Officials Preparatory Meeting for the Ministerial Conference; and the consultations between the African Diplomatic Corps in China and the Secretariat of the Chinese Follow-up Committee. FOCAC has also developed a legal cooperation dimension through the FOCAC Legal Forum, and at the Beijing Summit, China and African partners elevated the BRI within the future cooperation agenda while linking it to broader sustainable development objectives ([Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2018](#); [Zhu, 2013](#)).

Moreover, in the FOCAC in 2018, both parties signed the BRI agreement. The Chinese Prime Minister (PM), Li Keqiang, also confirmed that China will continue to support Ethiopia’s efforts to promote the well-being of its citizens and its economy, including railway lines and different cities in the country. According to the Prime Minister, his agreement will also facilitate not only uninterrupted power supply but also enable the creation of jobs. The PM also met with the leadership of the China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC) in Beijing. CRCC has expressed interest in investing in agro-industrial park development, oil and gas development, and the Beautifying Sheger river project. Following a meeting with the State Grid Corporation of China, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia oversaw the signing of a USD 1.8 billion investment agreement covering electric power transmission and distribution lines ([Embassy of Ethiopia, 2019](#)).

As a commitment from the meeting to gain further advantages, China and Africa launched the FOCAC Action Plan 2019-2021 to be implemented for both countries. There are some appealing points to note. Both parties reaffirmed that they will advance industrial capacity cooperation mechanisms along with the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, work for tangible results from various projects, and leverage the exemplary role of large projects in strengthening such industrial capacity cooperation. China also emphasized support for Africa's industrialization, agricultural modernization, infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and technology and equipment adaptation to African conditions under the FOCAC framework ([Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2018](#)).

Moreover, the Beijing Action Plan for 2025–2027 further institutionalizes the transformation of partnership initiatives across public health, agriculture, human resource development, digital transformation, and green growth. These initiatives reflect a broader conception of development that extends beyond physical infrastructure toward social resilience and institutional capacity building. Health cooperation now prioritizes strengthening Africa's public health systems and disease prevention mechanisms, while agricultural cooperation focuses on food security, technology transfer, and sustainable production. People-to-people exchanges also have a central position in the updated FOCAC agenda. The FOCAC Action Plan further emphasized vocational education, technical training, academic exchanges, and people-to-people and cultural cooperation as part of strengthening human capital and long-term societal linkages between China and Africa ([Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2018](#)). The designation of 2026 as the China–Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges underscores the growing role of soft power within FOCAC cooperation. From a neoliberal institutionalist perspective, these repeated interactions contribute to trust-building, norm diffusion, and the stabilization of long-term cooperative expectations.

3.3. Institution Plays A Key Important Role

In detail, the role of the institution in sharing habits and practices of cooperation as well as mitigating the competitive effect of anarchy can be analyzed from the existence of FOCAC for cooperation between China and Ethiopia. FOCAC has facilitated collective dialogue and practical cooperation between China and African states. FOCAC also has several sub-forums in the field, such as agriculture, education, culture, technology, youth, and entrepreneurship. Moreover, The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Interagency Pain Research Coordinating Committee (IPRCC) have been upgraded to FOCAC sub-forum. The sub-forum also often involves in the interactions with Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), businesses and academic, especially from China. In fact, African Union (AU) commission has become a full member of the FOCAC on October 2011. The United Nations has also become increasingly involved in dialogues around FOCAC-related cooperation, especially by promoting synergies between FOCAC, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the African Union's Agenda 2063 ([United Nations in China, 2022](#)). Thus, the FOCAC process is conceived as a mechanism to advance global peace and security, along with a commitment to common development.

Based on the basic realist assumption adopted by Robert Keohane regarding the necessity of regimes, the forum was also established in response to the pressures of globalization and the need for a comprehensive South–South response to the changing international economic environment. Through FOCAC, Chinese representative Wu Yi also urged both China and Africa to strengthen coordination to better facilitate both bilateral and multilateral interactions. She also stated that both parties should fully play a mechanism of collective dialogue by keeping close consultation, developing a new consensus, closely studying new trends in cooperation, expanding common interests, and appropriately addressing new problems arising during the course of interaction, in order to transform the forum into an effective platform for safeguarding the common interests of both China and Africa ([Shelton & Paruk, 2008](#)).

In line with neoliberals, which argue that institutions work to facilitate cooperation by increasing transparency and mutual responsiveness, it can be seen that one of the important roles of FOCAC is to create agreements. FOCAC summit has concluded some adoption of the Beijing Declaration and the Action Plans which lays the foundation for a new stage in China–Africa relations. For instance, in 2007, China and Africa launched a new kind of 'strategic partnership,' and in 2018, they launched action plans

that incorporated the BRI framework. The agreements also eventually stood as the source of further diplomatic exchanges and commercial interactions between China and Africa. Therefore, in line with the state-centric approach as the principal actor believed by Keohane, FOCAC has emerged as a significant interstate institutional mechanism in Africa, offering a structured framework for political, economic, and social cooperation with China, thereby requiring African states to respond strategically to optimize potential benefits. This forum also facilitates the transfer of China's development experience to African countries, with the aim of supporting the implementation of infrastructure projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Shelton & Paruk, 2008).

Since its formation, FOCAC has become a part of African efforts to enhance its negotiation position in the global political and economic landscape. The 2024 FOCAC Summit prominently features a commitment to facilitating Africa's green energy transition, exemplified by initiatives such as eco-friendly industrial parks in Ethiopia. These initiatives would facilitate the green transition and bolster attempts to maintain market access for African goods in regions like the EU which are adopting the the Common Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) (Mthembu, 2024). Thus, within this evolving framework, Ethiopia remains a strategic partner in China–Africa cooperation. As one of the earliest and most active African participants in FOCAC and BRI-related initiatives, Ethiopia has benefited from infrastructure development, including industrial parks and transport connectivity.

However, although BRI projects have supported economic growth, structural challenges persist, especially concerning trade imbalances, debt sustainability, and limited technology transfer; nevertheless, Ethiopia has shown growing agency and strategic engagement within the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) framework. Ethiopian policymakers have emphasized the importance of aligning Chinese cooperation with national development priorities, including industrialization, employment creation, and skills development (Nwankwo & Okoye, 2023). In response to this issue, the newer FOCAC agenda 2030 has been characterized by smaller-scale projects and institutional capacity building, which provide new opportunities to cooperate in the long-term national interests. This behavior aligns with neoliberal institutionalist assumptions that states act rationally within institutions to maximize long-term benefits while adapting to changing structural conditions.

3.4. China And Ethiopia: Maintain A Good Reputation

Apparently, the effort of China in maintaining good reputation in Ethiopia could be traced back in 2006 when China chose Ethiopia as one of four African partners (the others being Angola, DRC, and Nigeria) to obtain China's development assistance (soft loans). Prime Minister Meles Zenawi argued in 2012 that Ethiopia should move beyond the neoliberal paradigm and pragmatically pursue its own development path based on evidence of what works; he also remarked that Ethiopia was “twenty years behind China” and was trying to learn from China's development trajectory (Fourie, 2015; Zenawi, 2012).

Having learned from China's successful experience in eradicating poverty and fostering development, Ethiopia has started to open up to more serious cooperation by learning from economic experiences and extending technical assistance. For example, in 2006, the Ethiopian parliament supported China's membership in the UN Human Rights Council. The Ethiopian government has also signed a major framework agreement on financing with the China EXIM Bank, leading to a rapid increase in the number of Chinese infrastructure projects. Moreover, in 2007, Ethiopia, along with other African countries, supported all motions criticizing the Chinese regime. Chinese Ambassador to Ethiopia, Tan Jian, in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Beijing in 2019, stated that the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Ethiopia would continue to be at the forefront of Sino-African relations and serve as a model in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative cooperation. Chinese Ambassador to Ethiopia reaffirmed that China and Ethiopia are close and friendly brothers and comprehensive strategic cooperative partners. Cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative is the new driving force in China–Ethiopia relations, following the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) mechanism (Xinhua, 2019b).

In recent years, particularly since 2020, China has emphasized long-term development cooperation, social engagement, and people-to-people connectivity in Ethiopia to maintain a positive reputation. Since

2022, China has increasingly focused on capacity building, technology transfer, vocational education, and public health cooperation to strengthen mutual trust and legitimacy. For instance, cooperation in industrial parks, such as the Eastern Industrial Zone and the Hawassa Industrial Park, has contributed not only to employment generation but also to skills development and local value creation. During the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), China's provision of medical supplies, vaccines, and technical support further enhanced its image as a reliable partner in times of crisis. These initiatives have reinforced Ethiopia's perception of China as a pragmatic development partner that prioritizes economic growth and state capacity over political conditionality, thereby strengthening institutional cooperation and sustaining Ethiopia's support for Chinese positions in multilateral forums. This reputation-building strategy since the early 2020s has played a significant role in consolidating the comprehensive strategic partnership and maintaining Ethiopia's commitment to deeper engagement under the BRI and the FOCAC framework (Mengistu, 2022; Åberg & Kahsay, 2025).

3.5. Process of Reciprocity

According to Keohane, who argues that world politics is better described by iterated prisoner's dilemma games, in this case, both China and Ethiopia can be seen as seeking to deepen cooperation to achieve their respective goals and secure long-term benefits. For China, Ethiopia could play a pivotal role in FOCAC to provide a good example to other states for further cooperation by having a successful relationship with China. As a result, instead of providing the US with an opportunity to increase its influence in the African region, China has attempted to approach Ethiopia and other African states in FOCAC to expand its power and eliminate US influence. For Ethiopia, China's alternative economic model through BRI projects would be a source of investment, goods, and the establishment of infrastructure, which is expected to eventually boost Ethiopia's economic growth and more.

3.5.1. China's Motivation

According to Robert Keohane, neoliberal institutionalism theory accepts two key assumptions driven by a realist approach: international realism is anarchy, and the behavior of states is driven by rational calculations of their long-term cooperative interest to maximize their utility gain (Stein, 2008). In this regard, FOCAC can be considered a tool for China, the second-largest economy in the world after the US, to shift US' domination, especially in Africa. By participating in FOCAC, China can preserve its influence, especially to promote the implementation of BRI projects with massive infrastructure projects, which represent China's goal to enhance connectivity and economic cooperation with African states in many sectors, such as trade and market enlargement, interstate connections within infrastructure construction, and investment.

However, we cannot deny that despite helping Ethiopia's development by building infrastructure, providing investments to businesses and industries, and other opportunities, China's primary goals in Africa also include acquiring natural resources, gaining access to regional markets, and decreasing the power of the United States in that region. In fact, in 2017, Chinese companies had enormously invested in infrastructure and in industrial areas in Ethiopia. China has opened its first foreign naval base in Djibouti and extended the Port of Djibouti with several commercial ports to facilitate the export of minerals and goods that were produced in Ethiopia. As reflected in official and diplomatic reporting in 2019, major Ethiopia-related cooperation projects associated with Chinese engagement included the Addis Ababa Riverside Green Development project, railway-related infrastructure, energy projects, and airport expansion initiatives (Embassy of Ethiopia, 2019; Xinhua, 2019a).

In 2024, the cooperation through FOCAC highlights China's growing emphasis on normative power. Rather than positioning itself solely as a financial or infrastructure partner, China increasingly presents its development experience, often framed as "Chinese-style modernization," as a model adaptable to African contexts. Through FOCAC, China promotes norms related to state-led development, policy autonomy, and non-interference, offering an alternative to Western liberal development frameworks. This normative dimension suggests that FOCAC has evolved into a platform not only for project coordination but also for shaping development discourse and governance norms in Africa.

3.5.2. Ethiopia's Motivation

The author found that Ethiopia has received some gains and will receive more after implementing the Belt and Road Initiative project since 2018. The most tangible gains are economic benefits. In fact, Afework Kassu, Ethiopia's State Minister of Foreign Affairs, said that the Belt and Road Initiative is an advantage for African countries for infrastructure development and economic growth. He also reiterated that the initiative would bring economic cooperation, regional integration, as well as sustainable and speedy economic growth for Africa through infrastructure connectivity. The construction of the 759 km Addis Ababa–Djibouti rail link had been operationalized in January 2018 as the flagship project under the BRI. It has extended and linked the Port of Djibouti with several commercial ports and facilitated the export of minerals and goods produced in Ethiopia. It also connects Ethiopia to the maritime trade routes of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. As a result, over 3,000 projects have been generating nearly 600,000 jobs for Ethiopians (FOCAC, 2025). In addition, Ethiopia accelerated infrastructure cooperation in 2019 through projects linked to power supply, industrial parks, rail connectivity, and other large-scale development initiatives, which were also presented as contributing to employment creation and broader economic transformation (Embassy of Ethiopia, 2019; Yan & Sautman, 2024).

Ethiopia views the BRI as a strategic opportunity to accelerate its structural transformation and long-term industrialization agenda. Transport and logistics projects financed under this framework have improved connectivity, reduced trade and transportation costs, and strengthened Ethiopia's integration into global value chains. This claim is supported by the statement of the Ethiopian Minister, who claims that China is currently Ethiopia's top supplier of a wide range of items to the Ethiopian market and ranks ninth in terms of Ethiopian product purchases, making it a vital trade partner. As the largest trading partner and significant investor, China plays a pivotal role in Ethiopia's economic transformation. Ethiopia has continued to express its commitment to strengthening its strategic partnership with China, including under the BRI framework and the broader FOCAC process (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023; Yan & Sautman, 2024).

Moreover, industrial parks and manufacturing zones supported by Chinese investments around Addis Ababa have contributed to the expansion of light manufacturing, particularly in the textile and garment industries, while also facilitating job creation and technology transfer. These developments support Ethiopia's broader goals of export diversification, human capital development, and sustainable economic growth. Therefore, Ethiopia's motivation for engaging with the BRI extends beyond infrastructure development to include industrial upgrading, economic competitiveness, and long-term development objectives (Bharti, 2023).

3.6. Implications for Neoliberal Institutionalism

From a neoliberal institutionalist perspective, the evolution of FOCAC reinforces the argument that institutions play a crucial role in facilitating cooperation under conditions of international anarchy. Although FOCAC lacks legally binding enforcement mechanisms, it shapes state behavior through action plans, regular summits, monitoring mechanisms, and reputational incentives. The expansion of cooperation into normative, social, and human development domains increases institutional depth and raises the political and reputational costs of non-compliance. Consequently, FOCAC increasingly functions as a quasi-institution rather than a mere diplomatic forum. Its adaptability to emerging challenges, such as debt sustainability, development effectiveness, and global competition for influence, demonstrates institutional learning and resilience. For China, FOCAC serves as a strategic platform to consolidate economic and normative influence in Africa. For Ethiopia and other African states, it provides an alternative institutional channel to pursue development goals while diversifying external partnerships.

4. CONCLUSION

Regarding the benefited project from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in the neoliberal-institutionalism perspective, FOCAC can play an important role contributing to the cooperation between China and Africa in gaining mutual benefit. Different from western institution such as IMF and World

Bank, FOCAC has become a potential platform of China-Africa cooperation in the implementation of BRI through the dialogue and joint action plans, without imposing strict rules and requirements. China emphasizes that FOCAC functions as a mechanism for sharing successful development experiences rather than providing prescriptive instructions that African countries must follow. In addition, FOCAC also plays a crucial role in monitoring the realization of both parties' commitment to implementing BRI projects through information exchange and visits to special economic zones. Moreover, China's reputation as an economic miracle promises Ethiopia a roadmap for its own long-term development and economic progress, particularly as China has supported Ethiopia in constructing the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway and other major infrastructure projects. For long-term benefits, China should maintain its commitment, willingness, and uphold the win-win approach under BRI projects to achieve more tangible outputs in Ethiopia and strengthen China's positive reputation in the FOCAC framework.

Ethical Approval

Not Applicable

Informed Consent Statement

Not Applicable

Authors' Contributions

ARK conceptualized the study, developed the analytical framework using neoliberal institutionalism, conducted the literature and document review on FOCAC and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation in Ethiopia, analyzed FOCAC action plans and institutional mechanisms as they relate to China–Ethiopia engagement, and drafted the manuscript. The author also performed the interpretation of findings, critical revision, and final editing. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Notes on Contributors

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