India and Africa - Diplomacy of the 21st century

Introduction

Once known as the dark continent, Africa has emerged as the global theatre for power play and completion among all major world powers. With rising economic development and gradual integration of African states into the global economy, it is becoming the most sought-after destination for trade and investment by all major economies.

India and Africa share a long and rich history of interaction that dates back to ancient civilisations, including the trade ties between the Nile and Indus valleys. Interestingly, after being ignored for decades by India after independence, Africa, at present, has become the focal point of Indian diplomacy.

India and Africa enjoy special relations with their ties inextricably linked by shared colonial past, geography, socio-economic similarities and common developmental challenges. India's ties with African states have grown rapidly in the past two decades. At the same time, India is also facing many challenges due to its competition with China, which has become one of the most critical factors for Indian diplomacy in Africa.

To better understand India's engagement with Africa in the 21st century, we need to look into different dimensions of their ties:

India and Africa - Political Ties

India's engagement with African states is vibrant and deep-rooted. The political ties between India and African states have been based on the principles of south-south cooperation, people to people linkages and common developmental challenges.

- There has been regular high-level bilateral visits and multilateral summits between India and African states which have helped in strengthening political partnership
India has provided experts in agriculture, education and health sectors to many African states. India has also shared cheap generic drugs with African countries for AIDS and other diseases. Such gestures have generated goodwill among African states towards India.

India has also been an active member of the UN peacekeeping missions in Africa in the conflicted areas especially in Congo and South Sudan. At present, almost 6000 Indian soldiers are deployed in African continent under UN peacekeeping missions.

India has also been engaged with many African states in institutional building and good governance projects such as Pan-African e-network initiative in the education and health sector.

Indian government is also trying to win political support from East African states in countering Chinese military expansion in the Indian Ocean.

India also shares the platform with African states on several international and multilateral forum e.g. IBSA, BRICS etc.

Since 2008, the Indian-African relations have been institutionalized in the form of India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS). So far three such summits have been held.

India and Africa - Economic Ties

Due to its fast-growing population, increasing prosperity, rising middle class and its untapped mineral and agricultural wealth, Africa has presented many economic opportunities for India. Six of the world’s ten fastest growing economies are located in Africa. Business and private sector are seen as key drivers of economic relations.

- India has started the Indian Technical and Economic Programme to support training and technical assistance in African countries which will help in capacity building and knowledge sharing between India and Africa.
- Acquisition of energy is a dominant goal in India’s economic diplomacy.
- It is, therefore, unsurprising that three of the top four African trading partners with India (Nigeria, South Africa, Angola and Algeria) are major oil producers.
India s ONGC Videsh Limited had acquired 25 percent stake in the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company.

Recently Egypt invited India to participate in petro-projects in Suez Canal Economic Zone.

Indian private sectors have acquired many assets in African countries in oil refinery, agriculture, automobile and other sectors.

Due to growing maritime relations with Africa, one of the key initiatives of economic diplomacy of India is Blue Economy for sustainable development of maritime resources.

India has also provided massive grants and concessional line of credit to African states. E.g. in 2009, the Indian government gave a large grant to launch the Pan-African e-Network for health and education sectors. Recently India has offered a new line of credit of $ 10 billion to strengthen cooperation.

India and Africa - Trade Ties

Trade and investment flow from the heart of economic diplomacy. Due to its growing market size and ever-rising rate of private consumption, Africa has become a favourable destination for the private sector in India for trade and investments. Both India and Africa are seeking to derive economic benefit from their interactions

- India is Africa s fourth largest trading partner, with the trade turnover of $72 billion in 2014-15.
- Most of this trade entails primary commodities exported from Africa e.g. crude oil, pulses, leather, gold etc., while African countries mostly import manufactured goods from India e.g. medicines, automobiles, steel, plastic, refined petroleum products as well as ICT services etc.
- There is a growing level of Indian investment in Africa mostly in agriculture, refineries, telecommunication and IT sectors. Indian companies have invested over $35 billion in Africa over past decade
Security ties

India's security engagement with Africa is limited to anti-piracy operations around the Gulf of Aden and providing security assistance to small Island states in the Indian Ocean. India is undertaking regular patrols and assisting in surveillance of the Exclusive Economic Zone of Mauritius and Seychelles.

However, in recent times, India has reached out to African states through offers of greater military aid, capacity-building and training assistance.

Both India and Africa are facing the problem of terrorism. The influence and reach of Islamic State is expanding in African states. Hence there is a need to evolve multi-pronged, joint strategies for counter-terrorist operations.

Growing ambition of China in the Indian Ocean has also created an alarming situation for littoral states in the Indian Ocean. China has also expressed interest in establishing the military base in Djibouti. Such moves cannot be taken lightly by India. Hence there is need to increase Maritime cooperation with East African states to counter Chinese influence.

India and Africa - Geo-political ties

- Indian diplomacy towards Africa is strategically designed to generate goodwill through gestures like grants and concessional line of credit to African states that could be counted upon as allies in multilateral negotiations also they can help to better influence international institutions such as World Bank, IMF, WTO and UNSC etc.

- African states have remained committed to supporting India's bid for permanent seat in United Nations Security Council and overall reforms in United Nations including anti-terrorism convention.

- Africa had given full support to India among other countries to set up the first of its kind International Solar Alliance (ISA).

- India has been an active member in peacekeeping missions in African states. Our soldiers are well respected in Africa due to their professionalism.
India and Africa - People-to-people ties

There has been a welcome surge in people-to-people contacts as large numbers of African entrepreneurs, medical tourists, trainees and students have started coming to India and Indian experts and entrepreneurs have headed there.

The Indian Diaspora is present in considerable numbers in African states and their total number exceeds 3 millions, the highest population being about 1.5 million in South Africa, representing 3 percent of total population.

India has also announced 50,000 scholarships to African students to pursue their studies in India.

There is also increasing ties among the civil society organisations of India and those of African states. It is also expected that Non-governmental organisations and rural-based civil-society groups could provide guidance to African governments engaging with India.

India Africa Forum Summit

India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) is an institutional platform for India-Africa relations and engagements. It is held once in every three year. The first such summit was held in 2008 in New Delhi as a much needed intergovernmental attempt to give a direction and thrust to the bilateral synergy. So far, three such summits have been held, first in New Delhi (2008), second in Addis Ababa (2011) and third and most recent in New Delhi (2015).

This forum is increasingly being used by India to promote its economic diplomacy with Africa and to enhance relations in areas such as trade and investment.

Third IAFS, held in 2015 had the largest representation of African heads of state since the beginning of the process. It was attended by representatives of 54 African states which included 41 head of states.

The focus of the interactions to date at these summits has been on increasing the ties between India and Africa in several areas, including trade, investment, food security, information and communication technology (ICT), peace and security, and good governance.
Opportunities for Indian side

India’s carefully crafted diplomacy in Africa has brought positive results as no other country enjoys so much goodwill in Africa as India does.

- Both sides enjoy shared colonial past, dynamic present and promising future
- India has much to gain from resource-rich regions of Africa as they can provide raw materials to India’s industries
- There is ample scope in energy cooperation as though Africa is rich in crude oil resources, its refining capacity is limited, that’s precisely where India can step in with its much-advanced refinery sector
- Growing market size and rising middle class can provide an alternate market for Indian products
- The rising level of development and economic growth can provide investment opportunities to Indian entrepreneurs
- Indian Diaspora can play an important political, economic, and social role

Challenges

- India is not alone in having an Africa-centered strategy. Our competitors on the continent, such the European Union, China, Japan and the U.S. also have IAFS-type processes and often commit even more resources than we do.
- India’s political and economic relations with African states have generally been overshadowed by the more prominent Sino-African relations
- Economic ties with Africa are mainly left to private operators and middlemen in India
- Security threats and conflicts in North Africa have brought to the fore the high risk nature of investments in the African region
- Growing influence of Islamic state and other terrorist organisations also present risk for Indian investments
- Piracy related concerns and kidnapping of the vessels in the littoral areas are also areas of concern for India
• Alleged racist attacks against African students and nationals in India and similar incidents in African states involving Indians have the potential to deteriorate people-to-people ties

**Way forward**

India and Africa enjoy a special bond shaped by long historic past and current similarities. Their relationship is complementary and based on mutual trust that has potential to work in India's favour.

India is facing stiff competition from China in this region. This puts a great challenge for India's diplomacy. However, African states see India in a more positive light of a developmental partner as India's policy in Africa have been centered on capacity building and developmental partnership while China, on the other hand, is indulged in aggressive investment campaign.

There are certain other areas of concern. The most important one among them is racial attacks on African nationals in India. This can potentially jeopardise the goodwill enjoyed by India in Africa so it is important for the Indian government to take extra care to counter these attacks and ensure the victims get the deserved justice. Government should also take steps to create awareness to counter this racially discrimination.

**Conclusion**

Sooner rather than later it has been realized in Indian diplomatic circles that Africa is a region that India cannot afford to ignore anymore which has been manifested in increasing bilateral and multilateral visits. Huge complementarities exist to strengthen bilateral collaboration in diverse areas and upgrade India-Africa engagement. It is high time that the goodwill enjoyed by India among African nations should be leveraged in our advantage through economic and political diplomacy.
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