



A New Paradigm in India-Africa Engagement

This editorial is based on “[In Namibia, India shows a new way to engage Africa](#)” which was published in The Hindu on 18/08/2025. The article brings into focus India’s engagement with Africa, highlighting a shift from paternalism to partnership through shared heritage, targeted investments, and knowledge transfer initiatives.

For Prelims: [Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation \(ITEC\) program](#), [India's UPI system in Namibia](#), [India's Duty-Free Tariff Preference \(DFTP\) scheme](#), [UN peacekeeping missions](#), [Jeddah Amendment](#), [‘Vaccine Maitri’ initiative](#), [Military coups in Africa](#), [Digital public goods](#)

For Mains: Factors behind the Transformation in India-Africa Relations, Key Areas of Friction Between India and Africa.

India's recent diplomatic engagement with [Africa](#), exemplified by the **Indian Prime Minister's culturally nuanced address to Namibia's National Assembly**, signals a strategic shift toward **partnership over paternalism**. Unlike Western approaches often tied to conditional aid and migration control, **India is following a three-pronged approach in its engagement with Africa**: leveraging shared anti-colonial heritage, deepening present-day cooperation through targeted investments in education and technology, and building future-oriented ties through knowledge transfer initiatives. This approach emphasizes trust-building through inclusive dialogue and letting African priorities shape the agenda, positioning **India as a credible [Global South](#) partner**.



What Factors Underscore the Transformation in India-Africa Relations?

- **Heritage, Harmony, and Strategic Partnership:** India's early support for African liberation movements has paved the way for modern-day collaboration based on mutual respect and equality.
 - The philosophy of "**Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam**" (**the world is one family**) reflects India's approach to fostering closer ties with Africa.
 - This spirit of unity transcends mere diplomacy, becoming an emotional bond.
 - The **African Union's inclusion as a permanent member of the G20 in 2023** underscores India's commitment to Africa's enhanced global standing.
 - **India also opened 16 new diplomatic missions in Africa**, reflecting stronger ties.
- **Educational and Capacity-Building Cooperation:** Education remains a central pillar of India's engagement with Africa, with a focus on skills development and capacity building.
 - India's commitment to training African youth is evidenced by the **Indian Technical and**

[Economic Cooperation \(ITEC\) program](#), which has trained nearly 40,000 Africans in the past decade.

- India has also established educational institutions across Africa, such as the [Indian Institute of Technology \(IIT\) in Zanzibar](#).
- **Over 23,000 African students are currently studying in India.** This knowledge transfer is fundamental in empowering Africa's next generation of leaders and professionals.
- **Digital and Technological Transformation:** India's digital revolution is a powerful tool for enhancing Africa's technological infrastructure, with a growing focus on digital literacy and e-governance.
 - The **introduction of India's UPI system in Namibia** and telemedicine projects across Africa showcases the potential for India to assist in Africa's digital transformation.
 - In 2021, Togo's National Agency for Identification partnered with International **Institute of Information Technology Bangalore** through an MoU to deploy the **Modular Open-Source Identification Platform** as the backbone of its national digital ID system.
- **Trade and Economic Integration:** Trade has long been a cornerstone of India-Africa relations, with the value of bilateral exchanges reaching nearly **USD103 billion over the past decade, reflecting substantial growth.**
 - Currently, **India is Africa's third largest trading partner.** India's top export products in Africa are machinery and transport equipment, pharmaceuticals, textiles, automobiles, mineral fuels, oils, and wooden products.
 - Moreover, many **African Least Developed Countries (LDCs)** benefit from [India's Duty-Free Tariff Preference \(DFTP\) scheme](#).
- **Strategic and Security Cooperation:** India's growing defense cooperation with Africa reflects the **evolving geopolitical dynamics** and the need to ensure regional security.
 - Additionally, **India has actively supported maritime security in the Indian Ocean region, where Africa is a key player.** India's strategic interests are also shaped by the increasing importance of the Indian Ocean, a region vital for global trade and energy security.
 - **India has deployed nearly 5,000 personnel in [UN peacekeeping missions in Africa](#).**
 - Additionally, **India's contribution to maritime security includes the [Djibouti Code of Conduct and the Jeddah Amendment](#)**, aiming to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden and Western Indian Ocean.
- **Health and Humanitarian Assistance:** India has been a steadfast partner in Africa's healthcare journey, providing critical medical aid and expertise.
 - The **'[Vaccine Maitri](#)' initiative** is a prime example of India's commitment, supplying **Covid-19 vaccines** to multiple African countries during the pandemic.
 - Additionally, India's commitment includes donating ambulances and medical equipment, such as **'Bhabhatron' cancer treatment machines**, to countries in need.

What are the Key Areas of Friction Between India and Africa?

- **Economic Competition with China & Debt Dynamics:** The rising economic presence of China creates significant friction, **as Beijing's "checkbook diplomacy" often overshadows India's more measured approach.**
 - While **India** focuses on capacity building and skill development, China's massive infrastructure projects and state-backed loans, though often opaque, are more immediately attractive to cash-strapped African nations.
 - For example, between **1995 and 2020, China invested nearly USD 87 billion in West Africa**, funding energy and mining projects while diversifying its industrial supply chains to support Chinese manufacturing.
 - This has led to concerns of debt traps, with countries like **Angola and Ethiopia** accumulating billions in debt to China, which limits their economic sovereignty and **creates a stark contrast to India's more transparent, concessional lines of credit.**
 - This disparity, coupled with **China's growing military and port presence, such as in Djibouti**, raises concerns about the militarization of the Indian Ocean and places India in a reactive, rather than proactive, geopolitical position.

- **Infrastructure, Trade & Investment Challenges:** Poor infrastructure in many African countries raises transaction costs and limits integrated regional value chains critical for Indian firms' market access.
 - This **infrastructural lag restricts the scale and viability of Indian manufacturing investments** in Africa.
 - Also, Indian companies have faced setbacks in Africa due to corruption and transparency concerns.
 - Major infrastructure deals, including a **2024 airport leases in Kenya** that was annulled following bribery allegations, **affecting India's image as a reliable partner**
- **Governance and Political Instability Concerns:** While India has traditionally been a strong proponent of African sovereignty, it faces difficulty in dealing with **Africa's political instability and governance challenges, particularly in conflict-prone regions.**
 - The frequent **military coups** and unstable political environments in countries like **Mali, Sudan, and Guinea complicate India's engagement**, as it struggles to find effective ways to support democracy without interfering in local politics.
 - **From 2020-2023, Africa witnessed 9 successful coups**, with countries like Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso leading the charge.
 - India's role in conflict resolution remains limited, and political instability has led to a decline in investment and diplomatic efforts in some regions.
- **Divergence in Climate Action and Adaptation Goals:** While both India and Africa acknowledge the severity of climate change, differences exist over the methods and financial commitments required to combat it.
 - **India's growing emphasis on renewable energy and climate adaptation** is sometimes seen as **insufficient in addressing Africa's urgent need for funding and technology transfer**, particularly in areas like agriculture and infrastructure resilience.
 - Africa faces acute climate vulnerability, with **282 million people estimated to be undernourished in 2022 exacerbated due to climate impacts.**
 - India, despite leading the International Solar Alliance, has yet to match the scale of investments and technology transfer needed by Africa to mitigate the climate crisis.
- **Technology, Digital Economy & Innovation Divide::** While India promotes its **digital public goods model (like Aadhaar, UPI, CoWIN)** in Africa, its outreach sometimes clashes with Africa's growing partnerships with **Western Big Tech firms and China's Digital Silk Road.**
 - India's approach emphasizes **open-source, low-cost, scalable innovations**, but limited financing & weak digital infrastructure in Africa hinder uptake.
 - Meanwhile, Chinese firms like Huawei dominate telecom backbone, creating security concerns & squeezing India's space.
 - For example, **Huawei accounted for over 70% of Africa's 4G backbone, reducing the room for Indian ICT firms.**
 - The **resulting imbalance not only weakens India's digital diplomacy** but also raises concerns about data sovereignty and dependency on extra-African players.
- **Diaspora & Labor Market Tensions:** The **Indian diaspora (about 3 million especially in East and Southern Africa)** has historically been a bridge for trade and culture.
 - However, it can also create tension, as Indians often dominate small and medium-sized businesses in countries like **Kenya and Tanzania** leading to resentment among locals who view them as **disproportionately influential in the economy.**
 - Moreover, **as Africa pushes for "Africanisation" of jobs**, there is growing scrutiny of Indian firms **bringing skilled labor from India instead of building local capacity**, complicating India's image as a partner in development versus a competitor in limited job markets.

What Measures can India Adopt to Enhance Ties with Africa?

- **Promote Comprehensive Debt Relief and Financial Restructuring:** India can play a more proactive role in advocating for debt restructuring mechanisms for African nations, addressing concerns over the mounting debt burden.
 - By engaging with international financial institutions and collaborating with African governments, **India can facilitate more flexible and transparent loan**

conditions, ensuring that financial cooperation doesn't lead to economic instability.

- **Supporting multilateral debt relief efforts** would enhance India's credibility as a partner committed to Africa's long-term development.
- **Expand and Enhance the Scope of the ITEC Program:** India should significantly increase the scale of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, expanding its reach into **specialized sectors like technology, green energy, and agriculture**.
 - By offering cutting-edge training programs and building local capacity through tailored skill development initiatives, **India can solidify its role as a key partner in Africa's human capital development**.
 - This would not only empower African youth but also increase India's strategic influence by aligning its expertise with Africa's most pressing needs.
 - Such capacity-building efforts would further **strengthen people-to-people ties** and build a knowledge-driven ecosystem across the continent.
- **Championing Digital and Knowledge-Based Partnership:** India should take the lead in advancing digital connectivity and technology partnerships with Africa by supporting infrastructure projects that promote internet access, e-governance, and digital literacy.
 - Initiatives like providing **affordable internet connectivity in underserved regions**, introducing digital financial services like UPI, and supporting mobile-based solutions can accelerate Africa's integration into the global digital economy.
 - **India can also assist in developing Africa's tech ecosystem by fostering innovation hubs**, creating spaces for entrepreneurship, and mentoring African tech startups, thereby boosting the digital economy and fostering inclusive growth.
- **Support Agricultural Transformation with Agro-Tech Solutions:** India should focus on enhancing Africa's agricultural productivity by facilitating the adoption of agro-tech solutions that integrate modern technology with local farming practices.
 - This could involve **partnerships for precision farming, drone technology, and AI-based tools** for monitoring soil health, crop yields, and pest management.
 - **India's expertise in smallholder farmer support systems** can help African nations diversify their agriculture, reduce dependency on imports, and build sustainable food security.
 - Strengthening agriculture and food systems will directly align with Africa's economic aspirations and improve livelihoods across rural communities.
- **Increase Investments in Renewable Energy and Climate Change Mitigation:** India should prioritize renewable energy investments in Africa, **focusing on solar, wind, and hydroelectric power** to meet the continent's growing energy demands.
 - Collaborating on climate adaptation initiatives, particularly in agriculture and water management, can help African countries build resilience against climate change.
 - **India's expertise in large-scale solar power projects** can be leveraged to support Africa's energy transition, reducing dependency on fossil fuels and promoting sustainable development.
 - Joint efforts in this area would align with both India's and Africa's commitments to achieving the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while fostering green economic growth**.
- **Establish Strategic Trade and Investment Zones:** India should promote the creation of **Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and Industrial Parks in key African countries**, particularly focused on manufacturing and processing industries.
 - By providing the necessary infrastructure, technology, and training, India can facilitate the establishment of factories and value-added industries that can support Africa's industrialization efforts.
 - These zones can also **foster intra-Africa trade**, improving regional economic integration in line with the **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) goals**.
- **Cultivate a New Framework for Strategic Diplomacy:** India must adapt its diplomatic approach by adopting a more flexible, consultative framework with African nations, focusing on **mutual interests and co-development**.
 - Establishing a **'flexible diplomacy' model that accounts for Africa's diverse regions and political landscapes** can ensure that India's engagement remains relevant and responsive.
 - This will create a platform for Africa to voice its concerns and aspirations while aligning those with India's strategic objectives.

- **Champion Africa's Voice in Global Governance:** India must continue its strong advocacy for African representation in global governance platforms, such as the **United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the World Trade Organization (WTO)**.
 - India should lead efforts to build consensus on reforms that ensure Africa's presence at decision-making tables, amplifying the continent's voice on issues like **climate change, trade, and security**.
 - By championing African-led reforms and fostering stronger multilateral diplomacy, India can cement its role as a key partner in reshaping global governance structures to reflect the interests of the Global South.

Conclusion

As highlighted by **India's External Affairs Minister**, 'We put emphasis on the aspirations of Africa, not just the needs of Africa.' Similarly, **the Indian Prime Minister** stated in 2018, 'India's priority is not just Africa; India's priority is Africans - every man, woman and child in Africa. Together, these statements reflect **India's people-centric, trust-based approach, reinforcing its role as a credible Global South partner**.

Drishti Mains Question:

"India's engagement with Africa has evolved from a paternalistic approach to a partnership-based model, emphasizing shared heritage, capacity building, and knowledge transfer." Examine the key drivers of this transformation and discuss the challenges India faces in strengthening its strategic, economic, and technological ties with Africa.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims

Q. In which one of the following groups are all the four countries members of G20? (2020)

- (a) Argentina, Mexico, South Africa and Turkey
- (b) Australia, Canada, Malaysia and New Zealand
- (c) Brazil, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam
- (d) Indonesia, Japan, Singapore and South Korea

Ans: (a)

Mains

'The long-sustained image of India as a leader of the oppressed and marginalised nations has disappeared on account of its new found role in the emerging global order.' Elaborate. (2019)