

# STRATEGIC CONVERGENCES AND COMPETITIVE MULTILATERALISM: INDIA-AFRICA IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL REBALANCING

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## Abstract

*The contemporary phase of India-Africa relations is characterised by the dual processes of strategic convergence and competitive multilateralism, as both India and Africa recalibrate their external alignments in an era defined by global power diffusion, shifting, and rebalancing. India's renewed engagement with Africa goes beyond historical solidarity, shifting towards a pragmatic mix of economic cooperation, capacity building, and geostrategic alignment, particularly in response to China's assertive presence. Modi's July 2025 visit to three African nations (Namibia, Ghana, and Trinidad & Tobago) marks a renewed push in India's engagement with the continent, signalling an assertive diplomatic recalibration aimed at countering Chinese dominance, expanding economic footprints, and deepening South-South cooperation. The visit underscores Africa's rising importance in India's foreign policy matrix, not just as a trade and energy partner, but also as a diplomatic and strategic constituency critical to India's global ambitions. This article examines the strategic logic underpinning India-Africa relations by placing them within a changing multilateral architecture that includes the G20, BRICS+, the AfCFTA, and the Indo-Pacific construct. It contends that India's Africa policy embodies a multi-vector approach focused on development diplomacy, maritime security cooperation, and norm entrepreneurship within a contested global order. Through an analysis of institutional, political, and economic dimensions, this study highlights how India-Africa ties are developing amid escalating geopolitical rivalries and systemic shifts.*

**Keywords:** India-Africa Relations, Competitive Multilateralism, Strategic Partnerships, Global Rebalancing, Geopolitical Strategy

## Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed a decline of the US-led Western hegemony and the emergence of a multipolar world, wherein the India-Africa partnership has gained renewed strategic relevance. Evolving from its historical roots in anti-colonial solidarity and South-South Cooperation

(SSC), the partnership now reflects a pragmatic and multi-dimensional framework shaped by shifting geopolitical, economic, and normative dynamics (Basu & Arshed, 2024). India's contemporary Africa policy is embedded in the broader realignment of Global South power relations. As African states assert agency through initiatives like Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), India has moved from symbolic solidarity to a model of functional complementarity and developmental partnership (Adebajo, 2024). This shift responds to both structural changes in the global order and Africa's demand for investment, infrastructure, and global representation.

Historically grounded in forums like the Non-Aligned Movement and Bandung Conference, the relationship emphasised sovereignty and development justice. Today, however, it operates within a framework of transactional interests, ranging from trade and energy to climate action and capacity building (Bhatia, 2023). Africa's geopolitical weight has grown, as evidenced by the African Union (AU)'s G20 membership and the AfCFTA's integration agenda (UNCTAD, 2024). India's strategy increasingly aligns with African priorities, seeking co-development while advancing its geopolitical objectives.

India also navigates a crowded strategic landscape shaped by external actors like China, the United States (US), the European Union (EU), Türkiye, Russia, and the Gulf states. While lacking China's scale, India promotes a demand-driven, non-extractive model of development cooperation, leveraging tools such as credit lines, solar diplomacy, and digital partnerships (Qazi et al., 2025). This evolving strategy converges across three domains: development, through initiatives like the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) and Pan-African e-Network, security, via peacekeeping and maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean, and multilateral reform, where both sides push for greater representation in global institutions (Roy, 2023).

Nonetheless, India faces structural constraints, including limited fiscal space, bureaucratic hurdles, and competition from more resource-rich actors. Still, its soft power, democratic ethos, and emphasis on capacity building sustain its relevance in African contexts (Banik & Mawdsley, 2023). However, Modi's increasing centralisation of power, marginalisation of minorities, and erosion of institutional independence have diminished India's soft power and weakened its normative appeal in international diplomacy (Markey, 2022). It examines the India-Africa relationship as a dynamic interplay of opportunity and constraint within a multipolar world, focusing on development, security, and

multilateral engagement as key pillars of an emerging strategic convergence.

### **Conceptual Framework: Competitive Multilateralism and Strategic Alignment**

Competitive multilateralism refers to the proliferation of multilateral forums and institutions where states not only cooperate but also compete to shape global norms, institutional rules, and strategic influence. As articulated by Patrick (2015), competitive multilateralism reflects a world where states engage in “forum shopping,” creating or patronising international institutions that best reflect their strategic interests. This results in a fragmented institutional landscape, where overlapping regimes are less about rule adherence and more about leverage and influence.

Woods (2023) expands this idea by examining how emerging powers exploit institutional multiplicity to contest Western dominance. They argue that competitive multilateralism is not necessarily anarchic or destabilising but signifies the reordering of global governance where norm-setting is increasingly contested. Instead of submitting to existing norms, emerging powers such as India, Brazil, and South Africa challenge the hierarchy embedded in the post-1945 multilateral order. Thus, competitive multilateralism is a dual process: it enables strategic alignment for normative convergence among like-minded states, but it also breeds institutional competition, redundancy, and fragmentation, especially visible in Africa, where actors like China, the EU, Gulf states, and India compete for influence through development finance, security cooperation, and norm diffusion (Barrinha & Turner, 2021).

A nuanced understanding of competitive multilateralism requires multi-theoretical engagement. Neoclassical realism provides a foundational lens. It emphasises that while systemic factors like relative power and polarity shape state behaviour, domestic variables, elite perceptions, state capacity, and historical identity mediate how states navigate multilateral orders (Rose, 1998). India’s engagement in the IAFS or its participation in BRICS+ is not merely a function of structural power competition but is deeply shaped by its postcolonial identity, normative aspirations, and elite consensus on achieving strategic autonomy (Hall, 2016).

Closely related is the concept of strategic autonomy, especially salient in Indian foreign policy. Strategic autonomy is both a strategic goal and a cognitive framework guiding state behaviour. It implies a deliberate refusal to align permanently with any great power bloc, thereby enhancing

diplomatic flexibility in multilateral forums (Haidar, 2025). In the African context, the AU's Agenda 2063 and regional economic communities also reflect aspirations toward strategic autonomy, seeking self-financed peace operations, indigenous knowledge production, and value-added production. Together, these two lenses elucidate why and how India and African states engage in competitive multilateralism not as passive recipients but as rising actors seeking alignment, autonomy, and normative agency.

In the competitive multilateral context, one must interrogate the tenuous balance between strategic convergence and transactionalism. Strategic convergence implies long-term policy alignment based on shared values and complementary objectives, often visible in India-Africa cooperation on issues like climate justice, maritime security, or vaccine equity. Yet, in many cases, what appears to be convergence is thinly veiled transactionalism, where short-term gains, economic calculations, or diplomatic optics override deeper normative alignment. The partnership, for example, is often framed as a South-South solidarity narrative. However, empirical scrutiny reveals that Indian engagement frequently follows transactional logics, extending concessional credit lines with limited transparency or targeting critical mineral access without coherent developmental conditionalities (Vines & Oruitemeka, 2007).

Transactionalism also underpins the rise of issue-based coalitions within global institutions. India's alliance with the African Group in World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations is partly normative, focused on development justice, but also instrumental, aimed at countering Western pressure on *e-commerce* and agricultural subsidies (Hopewell, 2016). Similarly, the BRICS+ or the International Solar Alliance (ISA) represents platforms where strategic convergence on specific issues coexists with broader transactional motivations. Hence, competitive multilateralism thrives in this ambiguity, while both India and Africa publicly embrace principles of equity and inclusivity; behind closed doors, strategic bargaining often trumps moral consensus.

A crucial yet underappreciated dimension of competitive multilateralism is the role of norm entrepreneurs, states that seek to create, promote, and institutionalise new normative frameworks. India and Africa increasingly occupy this role, particularly within UN bodies, the WTO, and plurilateral platforms like the G77+China or India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA). India, for instance, has championed the idea of "data sovereignty" and a "Global Digital Public Infrastructure" framework, arguing for a distinct Global South approach to digital governance that balances privacy, innovation,

and public good (Jiang, 2024). These are not merely technocratic proposals but normative assertions about the kind of digital order the world should have, countering both US-led platform capitalism and China's surveillance-heavy model.

### **Strategic Convergences: Drivers of India-Africa Cooperation**

India's engagement with Africa is increasingly underpinned by a strategic triad of developmental cooperation, security collaboration, and normative convergence, setting the groundwork for a mutually responsive South-South partnership. India's developmental diplomacy in Africa departs from conventional donor-recipient frameworks by privileging demand-driven engagement, mutual benefit, and capacity-building. The model, often framed under the rubric of SSC, eschews conditionality and structural adjustment logic in favour of co-development and technological diffusion. The architecture of India-Africa cooperation is layered, spanning concessional finance, human capital development, digital connectivity, and grassroots technological innovation.

India's development partnership with Africa follows a consultative, demand-driven model focused on sharing development experiences and supporting African priorities. Emphasising sustainability and people-centric growth, India has extended over 190 lines of credit (LoC) worth US\$12.22 billion to 42 African countries for infrastructure projects across sectors such as energy, transport, agriculture, industry, and defence. Additionally, more than 37,000 African nationals have received training in India through Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) and Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarships over the past decade (MEA, 2025). Unlike China's heavy capital investments focused on large-scale infrastructure, India's smaller-scale but targeted projects, from solar electrification in Tanzania to Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME) development in Rwanda, reflect a deliberate strategy to avoid debt entrapment concerns and promote endogenous growth (Nantulya, 2023).

India's Pan-African e-Network Project, later evolved into the e-VidyaBharati and e-ArogyaBharati (e-VBAB) Network Project, is emblematic of this low-cost, high-impact model. By linking African universities and hospitals to Indian counterparts via tele-education and telemedicine, the project exemplifies a technology-enabled, soft-power-led developmental approach that builds institutional linkages and trust (Chaturvedi, 2016). Moreover, the ITEC Programme serves as a crucial vector of India's capacity-building strategy. Offering thousands of training

slots annually in fields ranging from information technology to disaster risk management, ITEC has produced a generation of African professionals embedded with Indian developmental norms. This is a subtle but effective projection of India's model of decentralised, frugal innovation and plural governance (Inani, 202025).

Yet, the normative framing of India's developmental model as inherently superior to China's needs critical scrutiny. While India's approach may be more consultative, its overall footprint remains modest, and implementation challenges, such as bureaucratic delays and limited private sector participation, persist (Venkatachalam & Banik, 2022). Besides, African voices are increasingly demanding a greater say in the design and monitoring of projects, pushing India to move from a model of recipient ownership to true co-creation (Carmody and Kragelund, 2016). The strategic convergence here is not merely about matching development objectives but about epistemic alignment: a shared belief in inclusive growth, sovereignty-preserving aid, and technology as a multiplier for local agency. As climate resilience, digital public infrastructure, and green transitions dominate development discourses, India's Digital Public Goods, such as the Aadhaar-inspired Modular Open Source Identity Platform (MOSIP), are increasingly relevant for African developmental aspirations (UNDP, n.d.).

### **Maritime Security and Counter-Terrorism**

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), long a theatre of global maritime geopolitics, is central to the security convergence between India and Africa. India's Strategic and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine, launched in 2015, explicitly articulates India's ambition to be a net security provider in the IOR, promoting a cooperative security architecture focused on maritime domain awareness, anti-piracy operations, and blue economy development (Bhattacharya, 2022). India has expanded naval cooperation with East African states such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique, and island nations like Seychelles and Mauritius, through joint patrols, hydrographic surveys, and naval exercises, including the biennial India-Brazil-South Africa Maritime (IBSAMAR) trilateral exercise with Brazil and South Africa.

Defence cooperation agreements with Seychelles, Mauritius, and Mozambique include capacity building in maritime policing, supply of naval equipment, and training of military personnel. Indian warships have made over 30 port calls to African nations in the past five years, symbolising India's intent to deepen naval diplomacy and interoperability

(MEA, 2025). This strategic engagement complements Africa's aspirations as outlined in the 2050 Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS), which seeks to secure the continent's maritime domain against threats such as piracy, illegal fishing, and trafficking.

India's support for AU peacekeeping operations further consolidates its security partnership. As the third-largest contributor to UN peacekeeping missions historically, many of which are in Africa, India has provided training, logistics, and doctrinal support, particularly to AU-led regional brigades. The Indian Army has also trained African forces through bilateral programmes, such as the Uganda-India Military Training Team, exemplifying India's capacity-building efforts in support of kinetic power projection (MEA, 2025).

However, this convergence is not without caveats. India's ambitions as a net security provider in the IOR are challenged by limited naval resources, logistical bottlenecks, and strategic overstretch, especially in the face of increasing Chinese maritime presence in Djibouti and Gwadar (Brewster, 2014). Additionally, some African countries remain cautious about external militarisation of maritime spaces, demanding a development-centric maritime security discourse, something India must heed if it seeks long-term trust and convergence.

### **Norm Entrepreneurship and Multilateral Reform**

The India-Africa partnership is partly based on normative convergence, especially in its common commitment to equity, sovereignty, and institutional reform in global governance. India and Africa promote a reformed multilateralism that reflects the demographic, economic, and political realities of the 21st century. This demand is most evident in their call for the expansion and democratisation of the UN Security Council (UNSC), the Bretton Woods institutions, and international trade regimes. India's endorsement of the Ezulwini Consensus, Africa's Common Position on UN reform, which calls for at least two permanent seats for Africa with veto power, demonstrates this alignment. During the Voice of the Global South Summits in 2023, India reaffirmed that without Africa's inclusion, global governance will remain fundamentally unjust. These normative alignments are increasingly rooted in shared experiences of post-colonial marginalisation and institutional exclusion.

India also collaborates with African countries in plurilateral forums like BRICS+ and IBSA, which serve as platforms for South-South norm-making on issues such as climate justice, digital governance, and inclusive

growth. In BRICS, India and South Africa have advocated for de-dollarisation, a fairer international tax regime, and open technology standards, reflecting their quest for strategic autonomy within the global order (Stuenkel, 2016). At the G20, where the AU was formally inducted as a permanent member in 2023 under India's presidency, New Delhi positioned itself as a bridge-builder between the G7 and the Global South. India's G20 presidency emphasised and signalled an ethical orientation to global governance, grounded in "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*" (the world is one family), that resonates with Africa's Ubuntu philosophy (Saran, 2023).

India's advocacy for digital inclusion and fair technology governance also reflects a shared normative agenda with Africa. Collaborations on data sovereignty, ethical AI, and capacity-building in cyber governance mark an emerging frontier of norm convergence. In this, India and Africa jointly resist techno-colonial models of digital extraction and surveillance capitalism, advocating instead for open-source, inclusive digital frameworks (UNCTAD, 2023). Nonetheless, norm entrepreneurship has limitations. India's stance on global internet governance, especially on issues of content moderation and platform regulation, has at times been at odds with liberal international standards.

Similarly, African states are not a monolith, and their normative preferences, particularly around democracy, human rights, and non-intervention, can diverge from India's strategic calculations. Therefore, while normative convergence is real, it is often strategically contingent and selectively mobilised rather than uniformly pursued. For these convergences to be durable, India must deepen co-creation, institutionalise reciprocity, and calibrate ambition with local contexts.

## **Navigating a Crowded Geopolitical Space**

The geopolitical salience of Africa has grown significantly over the last two decades, evolving into a theatre of strategic engagement for major powers and emerging players alike. This evolution is not merely a function of Africa's natural resource endowments or demographic dividends but also reflects the continent's centrality to contemporary global issues, ranging from climate change and migration to multilateral reforms and supply chain diversification. India's deepening engagement with Africa is thus situated within a crowded and increasingly competitive multilateral environment, where China, the US, the EU, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Türkiye, and Russia are asserting varying models of cooperation and influence. India's strategy must therefore be understood as a response to the structural constraints and opportunities posed by this pluralised global order.



China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents the significant reconfiguration of Africa's geopolitical landscape in the 21st century. With over 50 African countries signing BRI cooperation agreements and more than US\$155 billion in loans extended to African nations since 2000 (GDPC, 2000-2023), Beijing has leveraged infrastructure finance, digital connectivity, and state-owned enterprise diplomacy to secure long-term strategic footholds. From Djibouti's naval base to major port and rail projects in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, China's engagement has been both extensive and vertically integrated.

India is responding to China's assertive posture on the continent with a strategic caution that blends normative differentiation and pragmatic hedging. While not opposing the BRI outright in Africa, India has expressed concerns about its opaque financing, sustainability deficits, and the sovereignty implications of debt diplomacy (Pant & Passi, 2017). Unlike China's centrally driven, state-to-state model, India adopts a demand-driven approach that emphasises capacity building. A key example is the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), launched jointly with Japan in 2017. The AAGC promotes quality infrastructure, digital connectivity, and human resource development, underscoring values such as local ownership, environmental sustainability, and democratic governance (Prakash, 2018).

The AAGC, however, remains under-institutionalised and underfunded relative to the BRI, pointing to the structural asymmetry between Indian and Chinese capabilities. Nevertheless, India's engagements serve as soft power tools that resonate with Africa's aspirations for digital inclusion and skills development (Mol et al., 2022). India's strategic calculus also involves hedging against Chinese dominance by cultivating targeted partnerships with African regional organisations and states that have expressed reservations about Beijing's economic model. For instance, India's enhanced security cooperation with Kenya, Mauritius, and Seychelles in the Indian Ocean reflects an effort to counterbalance China's maritime encroachment under the guise of civilian port infrastructure (Pathak & Kumar, 2025). India's realist instincts converge with its normative appeals, creating a dual-track approach that seeks both strategic autonomy and moral legitimacy.

### **Engaging Africa in Plurilateral and Minilateral Formats**

India's strategic engagement with Africa is not confined to bilateralism. The evolving global order, marked by institutional fragmentation, power fragmentation, and issue-specific coalitions, has catalysed a turn

toward competitive multilateralism, wherein states pursue influence across overlapping and often competing forums (Roy, 2023). India has adeptly used plurilateral platforms such as the G20, BRICS, and the IAFS to amplify African voices and carve out space for normative leadership. The permanent inclusion of the AU in the G20 exemplifies a strategic convergence between Indian interests and African agency. This move not only enhances the legitimacy of global governance but also aligns India with the structural push for Global South representation, thereby reinforcing its leadership claims (PMO, 2023). Such alignment reflects India's interest in reforming global institutions like the UNSC and the World Bank, where African support is pivotal.

Minilateralism has also emerged as a key modality. India has forged issue-based trilateral formats that include African dimensions, such as the India-France-UAE and India-Israel-UAE trilaterals. These platforms offer functional cooperation in areas such as renewable energy, digital innovation, maritime security, and agritech, where African states act as both partners and beneficiaries. For instance, the ISA exemplifies how minilateral initiatives can scale up developmental solutions without getting bogged down in the inertia of large multilateral bodies (Chacko, 2022).

Moreover, these groupings allow India to triangulate its partnerships, enhancing strategic leverage vis-à-vis China and the West. In the Indo-Pacific context, India framed its Africa engagement as part of a larger SSC narrative, thereby distinguishing its model from neo-colonial critiques often directed at Western and Chinese interventions (Raj, 2025). The flexibility of minilateral formats enables India to act as a norm entrepreneur while safeguarding its strategic equities, a hallmark of competitive multilateralism in action.

### **Managing Competition from the West, Gulf States, Türkiye, and Russia**

Beyond China, India also navigates a landscape where Western powers, Gulf States, Türkiye, and Russia have re-intensified their Africa strategies. The EU's Global Gateway, launched in 2021, aims to mobilise €300 billion globally, with a significant share directed toward African infrastructure, digitalisation, and green transition (EC, 2021). The US, under its Prosper Africa and Build Back Better World (B3W) initiatives, has also increased its development financing and security partnerships in Africa (Carmody, 2025). India, while cooperating with both the EU and the US in various sectors, is wary of strategic crowding and potential alignment pressures.

Here, India emphasises its non-prescriptive model of development cooperation through the ITEC programme and concessional LoC, particularly in agriculture, healthcare, and vocational training. Unlike the US, which foregrounds strategic competition with China, or the EU, which often imposes governance conditionalities, India projects itself as a trusted partner rooted in historical solidarity and mutual respect. This narrative, though normatively powerful, contends with the realist calculations of African elites who prioritise tangible investments and strategic hedging of their own.

Gulf States such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar increasingly leveraged their financial clout and logistical reach to establish commercial and security partnerships in Africa, especially in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel (Dent & Ferragamo, 2024). India responded by integrating its Africa policy with broader West Asia outreach, recognising the tripartite convergence of energy security, diaspora diplomacy, and economic corridors. Notably, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, unveiled at the G20 Summit in 2023, includes ports and logistics hubs that could have spillover effects for African connectivity.

Türkiye's assertive posture, premised on defence exports, religious diplomacy, and humanitarian aid, has gained traction in Francophone Africa. Russia, despite sanctions and a limited economic footprint, leverages security cooperation and anti-Western rhetoric, exemplified by the deployment of Wagner forces in Mali and the Central African Republic. India, while not directly confronting these actors, relies on functional differentiation, emphasising civilian capacity building, democratic governance, and sustainable infrastructure, as a counter-narrative to securitised or ideological engagements (Chakrabarty, 2024).

### **Constraints and Strategic Dilemmas**

Despite the diplomatic flourish and political symbolism surrounding India-Africa relations, particularly in the wake of the IAFS, the bilateral trajectory is marked by a persistent implementation deficit. While rhetorical convergence around Global South solidarity, development cooperation, and shared colonial histories has infused the relationship with political capital, India's Africa engagement remains constrained by institutional fragmentation, resource limitations, and evolving geopolitical dilemmas (VIF Report, 2023). To convert symbolism into substance, India must ensure consistent follow-through on investment, trade integration, security cooperation, and institutional mechanisms.

India's developmental engagement with Africa is mediated through a patchwork of institutions, including the MEA, the ITEC programme, the Exim Bank, and private sector consortia. Yet, the lack of centralised coordination and inter-ministerial coherence undermines the strategic implementation of these efforts. The Development Partnership Administration, although tasked with consolidating India's aid delivery mechanisms, remains understaffed and under-resourced, limiting its ability to conduct follow-through and project monitoring across a vast and diverse continent (Joseph & Kumar, 2024). This institutional fragmentation is exacerbated by India's broader foreign aid framework, which lacks a comprehensive white paper or strategic doctrine comparable to the UK's Integrated Review or the US National Security Strategy, resulting in ad hocism and inconsistent prioritisation.

Indian diplomatic missions in Africa are often inadequately staffed. Despite the announcement in 2018 to open 18 new embassies in Africa, implementation has been slow, and many missions continue to operate with limited personnel and technical expertise (Joseph & Kumar, 2024). This undermines India's ability to sustain high-level political dialogue, provide technical oversight on grant-based projects, and engage meaningfully with local stakeholders. In contrast, China's Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and its resident embassies demonstrate a more agile and deeply embedded diplomatic presence, supported by political party linkages, business councils, and state-owned enterprises (Weinhardt & Petry, 2024).

### **Relative Commercial Weakness and Private Sector Hesitancy**

Despite the rhetoric of SSC, Indian businesses have not matched the scale or risk appetite of their counterparts on the continent. Indian investments in Africa remain uneven, with a concentration in select sectors, such as pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, and automobiles, and relatively stable economies, including South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya (Exim Bank, 2023). SMEs, which form the backbone of India's economy, often lack the financial muscle, market intelligence, and diplomatic support necessary to expand into less-charted African territories.

Furthermore, the absence of a robust framework to de-risk private sector involvement through sovereign guarantees, export credit insurance, or blended finance models reduces India's attractiveness as an economic partner. In contrast, Beijing leverages concessional loans, infrastructure-for-resources deals, and turnkey project financing via the China Exim Bank and China Development Bank, thereby crowding out competitors

with less subsidised capital structures (Dollar, 2016). India's LoC model, although extensive in scope, is hampered by bureaucratic hurdles, delayed disbursements, and insufficient aftercare. The resulting credibility gap weakens India's development diplomacy, even in states that are politically well-disposed toward New Delhi.

### **Africa's Heterogeneity and Divergent Expectations**

Africa is not a monolith, and any meaningful engagement strategy must grapple with the continent's vast internal heterogeneity across governance regimes, regional economic communities, linguistic blocs, and developmental priorities. For instance, the strategic imperatives in the conflict-prone Sahel differ starkly from those in the relatively stable Southern African Development Community. India's ability to navigate these sub-regional dynamics remains nascent, particularly given its limited presence in Francophone and Lusophone Africa, where historical and linguistic barriers limit influence.

Moreover, Indian policymakers have not consistently calibrated their outreach to the evolving geopolitical preferences of African states. Countries in the Horn of Africa, like Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Somalia, are increasingly caught in the crosshairs of great power rivalry involving China, the US, and the Gulf states. India's naval deployments, maritime capacity building, and infrastructural investment in the western Indian Ocean have yet to form a coherent corridor strategy that links East Africa's Blue Economy ambitions with India's Indo-Pacific outreach. While India seeks to advance a security and growth architecture for the SAGAR, many African littoral states remain wary of external securitisation narratives that overlook local economic imperatives and sovereignty concerns.

### **Strategic Autonomy vs. Alignments: A Tightrope Act**

A core dilemma in India's Africa policy is the tension between its normative commitment to strategic autonomy and its deepening alignment with Western powers through forums such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. These frameworks are often perceived by African states as exclusionary, securitised, and insufficiently representative of the Global South's priorities (Pant and Bhattacharya, 2025). While India emphasises that its Indo-Pacific vision is inclusive and not anti-China, African stakeholders remain ambivalent, particularly given their increasing economic reliance on Beijing and preference for non-alignment or strategic hedging (Obeng-Odoom, 2021).

India's cautious approach to UN reforms and its muted voice on contentious issues like the Ukraine war reflect its balancing act, but this ambiguity can sometimes alienate African partners seeking clearer commitments on global governance democratisation (Chatterjee and Maitra, 2025). The strategic dilemma extends to multilateral platforms. India has made a strong push for Africa's permanent representation in the UNSC and the G20. Yet, its ambitions for global leadership occasionally compete with those of leading African powers, notably South Africa and Nigeria. The overlapping leadership claims dilute solidarity and complicate coordination within groupings like IBSA, BRICS+, and the G20.

### **Geopolitical Overstretch and Competing Priorities**

India's foreign policy bandwidth is also increasingly stretched across competing geopolitical theatres. The continental focus on the China border, Pakistan, maritime security in the Indian Ocean, energy partnerships in West Asia, and supply chain resilience with Southeast Asia diverts institutional attention from Africa. This is evident in the declining frequency of high-level summits such as the IAFS, with the fourth iteration, originally scheduled for 2020, postponed indefinitely due to COVID-19 and diplomatic inertia. In contrast, China's triennial Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and Japan's Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) maintain continuity and visibility, reinforcing the perception that India's Africa policy lacks staying power.

Moreover, India's development financing and soft power investments in Africa are dwarfed by those of China, the EU, and Gulf actors such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia. While India's comparative advantage lies in capacity-building, education, digital public goods, and affordable medicine, the scale mismatch with mega-infrastructure projects funded by its rivals creates asymmetries in visibility and influence (RIS, n.d.). African elites, often driven by domestic political economies and urgent developmental needs, prioritise short-term gains from extractive or infrastructural deals over long-term knowledge partnerships.

### **Normative Disjunctures and Domestic Constraints**

India's normative discourse on South-South solidarity and capacity-building does not always translate into politically salient narratives for African publics. Development partnerships tied to LoCs or vendor-driven models risk being perceived as top-down or transactional, especially

when not embedded within local contexts or participatory processes (Chaturvedi, 2016). The soft power appeal of Bollywood, Ayurveda, and democratic pluralism, though resonant, faces competition from Gulf-funded media ecosystems, Chinese Confucius Institutes, and Francophone cultural diplomacy. On the domestic front, India's resource constraints, especially post-pandemic fiscal pressures, inflationary trends, and infrastructure backlogs, limit the financial elasticity required to scale up its Africa footprint. Additionally, the rising tide of identity-based politics and inward-looking economic and political nationalism constrains the ideological bandwidth for a robust, outward-facing Africa strategy.

India's Africa policy also suffers from issue-area incoherence. For instance, its vaccine diplomacy, exemplified by the supply of Covaxin and Covishield during the COVID-19 crisis, initially garnered goodwill but was later interrupted by domestic export restrictions during India's second wave. This eroded credibility, even among African countries that had lauded India's early outreach (Saran, 2016). Similarly, India's push for digital public infrastructure, such as the Aadhaar-inspired MOSIP, has not been accompanied by a comprehensive data governance or digital rights framework that aligns with African concerns over surveillance, consent, and cyber sovereignty (MIB, 2024).

At the trade and investment level, India's negotiations toward a preferential trade agreement with the AfCFTA remain exploratory. While Indian businesses could benefit from continent-wide tariff reductions, the absence of a calibrated diplomatic push or dedicated trade facilitation mechanisms risks missing the early-mover advantage (Patrick, 2024). India's e-Vidya Bharti and e-Arogya Bharti initiatives, which leverage digital platforms for education and health cooperation, are also constrained by last-mile connectivity issues in rural Africa and insufficient marketing by Indian missions.

As India deepens its engagement in Africa amid increasing geopolitical competition, its doctrine of strategic autonomy, rooted in non-alignment and evolving towards multi-alignment, both guides and restricts its approach. While this autonomy provides flexibility, it often leads to cautious diplomacy, weak institutional links, and strategic hesitancy. India's recent repeated UN abstentions and its reluctance to engage directly in African security frameworks, despite its peacekeeping role, reflect a pattern of hedging rather than reliable or assertive leadership.

## Conclusion

India-Africa relations are evolving from symbolic and episodic summits and official visits to a more structured, focused partnership. Rooted in shared colonial histories and aligned development goals, the partnership now faces pressures from a competitive geopolitical landscape where both superpowers and emerging powers vie for influence. In a multipolar world characterised by China's assertiveness in the continent, Western re-engagement, and Gulf activism, India needs to adopt a competitive form of multilateralism, emphasising cooperation on maritime security, strategic alliance, and sustainable development. Africa is a partner, not a passive periphery, and India must move beyond rhetoric, high-level episodic visits, or meetings to cultivate genuine, transformative, and sustained engagement.

Significantly, Modi's three-nation Africa outreach in July 2025 reinforces the continent's centrality to India's evolving geopolitical calculus. However, despite its symbolic significance, it raises critical questions about India's consistency and delivery capacity. Many previous pledges and investments remain under-implemented, mired in bureaucratic delays and limited follow-through. Unlike China's centrally coordinated engagement, India's Africa policy often suffers from institutional fragmentation and a lack of private sector dynamism.

In conclusion, India-Africa relations in the era of global rebalancing reflect deepening strategic convergences rooted in South-South solidarity, economic complementarities, and mutual aspirations for a multipolar world. However, India's engagement needs to be a transformative approach and move beyond symbolic diplomacy toward institutionalised cooperation, capacity building, and inclusive development frameworks. As competitive multilateralism intensifies, with China, the West, and Gulf states vying for influence, India's credibility will depend on its ability to deliver transparent, demand-driven, and locally attuned initiatives that empower African agency rather than mirror great power competition.

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