

India must engage more with Africa by playing up its advantages

As many African countries transitioned from colonialism to freedom, India's democracy was the template for them. The continent's strongmen, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Congo's Patrice Lumumba, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser had strong personal links with India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru who saw the potential benefits of increased economic and strategic cooperation with the continent.

As Prime Minister Modi's three-nation Africa tour in the run-up to the BRICS summit today gets underway, the story has changed to one of lost opportunities and benign neglect. It is not the India has done badly in Africa. But given the historic ties between many African countries and India, a more robust engagement would have paid much higher dividends. India's lack of a consistent proactive policy towards Africa led to the Chinese stealing a march over it in terms of investment and trade. Despite being Africa's oldest trading partner, India is now forced to play catch up with China as the latter has aggressively wooed the continent's leaders with its largesse, pushing its investments up to \$ 3.5 trillion in 2015. In contrast, India will cross the \$ 500 billion mark in 2020. This suggests that India and Indian companies must shed their traditional conservatism and pursue bigger gains in Africa. New Delhi did the right thing in extending a \$ 10 billion line of credit from 2015 to 2020 but it must now push to see that it is used appropriately. Whereas India's policy has focused on job creation in the countries it has invested in, China has tended to bring in its own labour causing resentment among the locals. The good news is that India is scrambling to rectify past mistakes and re-engage with Africa in a big way as the series of high profile visits in the last four years shows.

India must play to its natural strengths and move swiftly into the education and infrastructure fields as well as IT in Africa. The Chinese model has often been criticised for creating huge debts for the nation in which it sets up projects, the Nairobi-Mombasa rail link being one example of this. The \$ 4 billion project has left Kenya with enormous debts and the Chinese military base in Djibouti has raised fears that Beijing is abandoning its non-interference policy in the region. Mr Modi's promise of opening an embassy in Rwanda is welcome; it is one of the economic success stories of Africa despite long years of civil strife. Many African countries are wary of putting all their eggs in the Chinese basket. This is something India must exploit to its advantage.

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