

# STAGING A COMEBACK, RE-ENERGISING INDIA'S AFRICA POLICY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Africa, African Union (AU) and India

Africa is considered a foreign policy priority by India. The Narendra Modi government designed a forward-looking strategy to deepen relations with African countries. Its implementation was managed quite well, with much political will invested in expanding the multi-faceted engagement. Even as the COVID-19 era began in March 2020, New Delhi took new initiatives to assist Africa through prompt despatch of medicines and later vaccines.

But now the policy implementation needs a critical review.

The latest economic data confirms what was apprehended by experts: India-Africa trade is on a decline. According to the Confederation of Indian Industry, in 2020-21, India's exports to and imports from Africa stood, respectively, at \$27.7 billion and \$28.2 billion, a reduction of 4.4% and 25% over the previous year. Thus, bilateral trade valued at \$55.9 billion in 2020-21, fell by \$10.8 billion compared to 2019-20, and \$15.5 billion compared to the peak year of 2014-15.

A shot at economic logic

India's investments in Africa too saw a decrease from \$3.2 billion in 2019-20 to \$2.9 billion in 2020-21. Total investments over 25 years, from April 1996 to March 2021, are now just \$70.7 billion, which is about one-third of China's investment in Africa. COVID-19 has caused an adverse impact on the Indian and African economies.

India's top five markets today are South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Kenya and Togo. The countries from which India imports the most are South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Angola and Guinea. India's top three exports to Africa are mineral fuels and oils (processed petroleum products), pharmaceutical products and vehicles. Mineral fuels and oils, (essentially crude oil) and pearls, precious or semi-precious stones are the top two imports accounting for over 77% of our imports from Africa. The composition of the India-Africa trade has not changed much over the two decades.

These latest trends in bilateral economic relations should be assessed against two broad developments.

Fortifying the Africa outreach

First, COVID-19 has brought misery to Africa. As on June 24, 2021, Africa registered 5.2 million infections and 1,37,855 deaths. Given Africa's population (1.3 billion) and what happened elsewhere (the United States, Europe and India), these figures may not have drawn international attention, but Africans have been deeply affected and remain ill-equipped. A recent World Health Organization survey revealed that 41 African countries had fewer than 2,000 working ventilators among them. Despite these shortcomings, Africa has not done so badly. Experts suggest that the strength of community networks and the continuing relevance of extended family play an important supportive role. Besides, Africa has some of the protocols in place, having recently suffered from Ebola, and managed it reasonably well. Sadly though, with much of the world caught up in coping with the novel coronavirus pandemic's ill effects, flows of assistance and investment to Africa have decreased.

India's halt to vaccine exports 'very problematic' for Africa

Second, as a recent Gateway House study, [Engagement of External Powers in Africa: Takeaways for India](#), showed, Africa experienced a sharpened international competition, known as 'the third scramble', in the first two decades of the 21st century. A dozen nations from the Americas, Europe and Asia have striven to assist Africa in resolving the continent's political and social challenges and, in turn, to benefit from Africa's markets, minerals, hydrocarbons and oceanic resources, and thereby to expand their geopolitical influence. A mix of competition and contestation involving traditional and new players, especially the United States, the European Union (EU), China, Japan and India, has attracted much attention from governments, media and academia.

While China has successfully used the pandemic to expand its footprint by increasing the outflow of its vaccines, unfortunately India's 'vax diplomacy' has suffered a setback. This came in the wake of the debilitating second wave of COVID-19 in the country and the shortage of vaccine raw materials from the U.S. Geopolitical tensions in Asia and the imperative to consolidate its position in the Indo-Pacific region have compelled New Delhi to concentrate on its ties with the United Kingdom, the EU, and the Quad powers, particularly the U.S. Consequently, the attention normally paid to Africa lost out.

Jaishankar pitches for closer India-Africa defence cooperation

This must now change. For mutual benefit, Africa and India should remain optimally engaged. It was perhaps this motivation that shaped the substantive intervention made by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on May 19 in the UN Security Council's open debate on conflict and post-pandemic recovery in Africa. Touching on politico-diplomatic dimensions, he regretted that "[the voice of Africa is not given its proper due](#)" in the Security Council. He highlighted India's role in peacekeeping in Africa, in lending support to African counter-terrorism operations, and contributing to African institutions through training and capacity-enhancing assistance. India's aid for economic development in the African continent is set to continue, he assured. His visit to Kenya (June 12-14 ) has helped to re-establish communication with Africa at a political level.

It is time to seize the opportunity and restore Africa to its primary position in India's diplomacy and economic engagement. The third India-Africa Forum Summit was held in 2015. The fourth summit, pending since last year, should be held as soon as possible, even if in a virtual format. Fresh financial resources for grants and concessional loans to Africa must be allocated, as previous allocations stand almost fully exhausted. Without new commitments, India's Africa policy would be like a car running on a near-empty fuel tank.

India, China and fortifying the Africa outreach

The promotion of economic relations demands a higher priority. Industry representatives should be consulted about their grievances and challenges in the COVID-19 era. It is essential "to impart a 21st century complexion to the partnership with Africa", as the above-mentioned study argues. This means developing and deepening collaborations in health, space and digital technologies.

Finally, to overcome the China challenge in Africa, increased cooperation between India and its international allies, rates priority. The recent [India-EU Summit](#) has identified Africa as a region where a partnership-based approach will be followed. Similarly, when the first in-person summit of the Quad powers is held in Washington, a robust partnership plan for Africa should be announced. For it to be ready in time, work by Quad planners needs to begin now.

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