

# Engagement of External Powers in Africa: Takeaways for India

by **Rajiv Bhatia**, Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Policy Studies Programme





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## About the Author



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*As an array of external partners seek to broaden and deepen their relations with Africa, India needs to assess and gain insights into these developments. This could lead to real improvements in policy and allow India to refine and expand its own relationship with the African continent.*

## 1. Introduction

For securing policy attention of the Indian government and business elite, Africa competes with other geographies – South Asia, Indo-Pacific, West Asia, Central Asia and Eurasia, besides the major powers. In the past decade, and more specifically since 2014, increased attention has been paid to Africa. Yet, despite the government's steady endeavours, Africa is still to become a top priority for this nation, in the fullest sense.<sup>1</sup>

The official narrative on India's partnership with Africa has been unidimensional: it largely focuses on what happens to India-Africa relations in isolation from Africa's interactions with the rest of the world. The narrative presented by the media and the scholarship is slightly better, as it views India's role with reference to the expanding footprint of China on the African continent. But it too is inadequate, for it largely ignores the broader geopolitical canvas that alone can explain the entire spectrum of power shifts and new political and economic trends. Africa's portrayal as 'the dark continent' is yet to end.

Hence, the *raison d'être* of this policy paper is to present something different, perhaps new - namely, a critical but objective examination of the engagement of external powers in Africa in recent years, with a view to drawing appropriate lessons for the consideration of India's policymakers and business leadership. This exercise is guided by three objectives:

1. To examine the policies, roles and activities of foreign powers in the African continent in respect of strategic, political and economic domains.
2. To compare and contrast the policy approaches of traditional and new players, especially in recent years.
3. To draw conclusions and formulate recommendations as to how India should recalibrate its Africa policy for ensuring a more effective pursuit of its national interest.

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<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister's address at Parliament of Uganda during his State Visit to Uganda, Ministry of External Affairs, 25 July 2018. [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/30152/Prime\\_Ministers\\_address\\_at\\_Parliament\\_of\\_Uganda\\_during\\_his\\_State\\_Visit\\_to\\_Uganda](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/30152/Prime_Ministers_address_at_Parliament_of_Uganda_during_his_State_Visit_to_Uganda)



## 2. Backdrop

In the 21st century, Africa has been experiencing the third 'scramble' for gaining natural and energy resources, markets, influence, and international cooperation by foreign powers. The first 'scramble' was the competition among the European powers in the 19th century for colonising Africa, resulting in the diplomatic settlement of the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. It demarcated territories that fell within the spheres of influence of individual European nations. The result: colonialism held sway on most of the continent until the 1960s or even later, in some cases.

The second 'scramble' assumed salience during the Cold War, particularly in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s when the U.S.-led western camp and the USSR-led communist camp sought out clients, built alliances and played an active role in armed conflicts ranging from the Congo to Ethiopia and Somalia to Mozambique.

The third 'scramble' began in the 1990s, but it gained real traction at the beginning of the present century, with China launching a vigorous drive to expand and deepen its multifaceted linkages with Africa.

This ambition assumed prominence following the launch of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) series of conferences in 2000. It triggered two sets of reactions: first, the traditional players already engaged in Africa - European nations, the U.S. and Japan - began to feel the heat of new competition and challenge posed by China and were forced to adapt their own approaches; and second, the Chinese drive motivated and encouraged other emerging powers – India, Brazil, Russia, Turkey, UAE, Indonesia, South Korea and Australia – among others to join the race for Africa's attention.

It was evident that the third 'scramble' was essentially different and unique: foreign nations this time did not seek African lands in order to establish their colonies, nor did they forge military alliances. Now, it was about establishing new strategic, political, security, economic and technological linkages that would help both sides, and especially, about persuading Africa that its renaissance would be consolidated in the process. And yet, China's policies in the present century have features which drew criticism from the western and other circles that China's approach is infused with neo-colonialism, a charge Beijing refuted steadfastly.

The mix of ongoing competition and contestation among a dozen or so powers has been unfolding at a time when Africa's renaissance, long a mere aspiration, has begun to turn into a reality. The replacement of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) by the African Union (AU) in July 2002, marked a shift from the dated and narrow concept of Pan-Africanism to its 21st century version. Rapid economic growth recorded by several African economies in the past two decades due to internal reforms, the global growth and rise of Asian economies, especially the Chinese economy; the winding down of several armed conflicts because of Africa's acceptance of 'Silencing the Guns by 2020' as a strategic goal; the adoption of Agenda 2063 by the AU and the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) combined to create an environment of hope. Afro-pessimism began to give way to Afro-optimism.

However, following the decline of commodity prices in the past five years, Africa's economic growth slowed down. The serious damage wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020 to the global economy, including to African economies, is bound to have an adverse impact on Africa. Its implications for the heavy debt owed to China and the global financial institutions, are a cause of widespread concern. Africa's growth, at the end of 2020, was set to slow down in the short-term, given the setbacks suffered by global economy.

Besides, the pandemic indefinitely halted the process of operationalisation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the agreement which caused much excitement about future economic prospects since its adoption in March 2018. (Latest reports indicate its operationalisation with effect from 1 January 2021, but a more reliable picture may appear in a few months.)

Other developments during 2020 – disputed elections and violence in Guinea and the Ivory Coast and armed conflict between Ethiopia's central government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) resulting in large-scale deaths and massive exodus – cast dark shadows on Africa's progress towards stability and democratisation.

Finally, the year also witnessed a pause in the world's institutionalised interaction with Africa as, due to COVID-19, the summits with the EU, India and Turkey were postponed. China was the only major partner that managed to convene an abridged summit with African leaders in the virtual format.

### 3. Africa's external engagement

The best way to evaluate the current state of Africa's external engagement is to classify its partners in four distinct categories: China, the West, Asia, and other powers. In addition, a brief look at the policy approach adopted by the Group of 20 (G20) may also be relevant to this discussion.

#### 3.1 China

In a short period of two decades (2000-2020), China succeeded in bringing about a spectacular expansion of its political, defence, economic and cultural relations with Africa, across the board. With one exception i.e., eSwatini, all African states now adhere to a 'One China' policy and do not maintain official ties with Taiwan. China is the power with which Africa has held periodic summits and ministerial conferences with an impressive regularity, with each occasion utilised for committing China to new funding, programmes and initiatives. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) touched several corners of the continent, having been astutely woven into the deliberations and the Beijing Declaration of FOCAC in September 2018.

In the economic domain, several trends should be highlighted. China's trade with Africa increased from \$10.6 billion in 2005 to over \$221 billion in 2014, to eventually decline to \$208.7 billion in 2017. For hydrocarbons, its major partners have been Nigeria, Gabon, Sudan, South Sudan, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), while the supply of minerals largely comes from South Africa, Zambia, Namibia and Zimbabwe.

After the UK and UAE, China ranked as the third largest investor in 2007-16, with a total investment of \$64.5 billion. Loans extended by China to African countries amounted to \$94.4 billion during the period from 2000 to 2015. An estimated 230,000 Chinese workers were present in Africa at the end of 2016. Besides, infrastructure development emerged as “the best-known brand of China-Africa cooperation and also the largest factor for China's positive image in Africa,” as Chinese scholars Zeng Aiping and Shu Zhan put it.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.2 The West

Despite the colonial stigma, the European powers, with France and the U.K. in the lead, continue to maintain extensive economic relations and development partnership with African states in all five regions – north, west, east, central, and southern. With the help of a new institution, the Africa-AU summit launched in April 2004, the scope of dialogue and cooperation has steadily increased.

In 2007, ‘A Joint Africa-EU Strategy’ was developed and pursued to strengthen political partnership and enhance cooperation at all levels. The official 2017 data indicated that Europe accounted for 33% of total African imports and 41% of Africa exports. For the period 2014-20, the EU Commission’s budget for Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Africa was \$37.5 billion (€31 billion).

The European view, therefore, persists that it is Africa's main partner even as evidence suggests strong and rising competition from China and other players. It is noteworthy that European countries such as France and Italy continue to participate actively in promoting cooperation with their African partners. (For example, France 24, the international TV news channel recently revamped its coverage to project its Africa connections in a popular format called ‘Across Africa.’)

The highlights of U.S. policy towards Africa include successive administrations’ endeavours to help in addressing the key challenges of poverty, hunger, disease, famine as well as security and governance.

The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) which gave duty-free treatment to most African exports to the American market, the U.S.-Africa Command (AFRICOM) and the steady engagement of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) represented the diverse facets of Washington’s Africa strategy.

The U.S. institutions bore the brunt of carrying forward interactions with Africans, despite the manifest disinterest of President Donald Trump in Africa since 2016. The U.S. approach largely became defensive and reactive, centred on warning African states of the dangers of reliance on China and Russia.

In this context, the advent of the Biden Administration has raised African hopes about a better phase in U.S.-Africa ties. Gilbert M. Khadiagala spelt out African expectations in the areas of trade and investment, security, democratisation and multilateralism, while cautioning against the possibility of fundamental shifts in the U.S. policy.<sup>3</sup> Economic relations need closer attention, given the fierce competition with China. U.S.-Africa trade grew to \$100 billion between 2002 and 2008, declined to \$39 billion in 2017 to then rise again to \$57 billion in 2019.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Zeng Aiping and Shu Zhan, ‘Origin, Achievements, and Prospects of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation’. *China International Studies*, September/October 2018, [https://www.focac.org/eng/zfs\\_1/P020181026382446204313.pdf](https://www.focac.org/eng/zfs_1/P020181026382446204313.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert M. Khadiagala, ‘Africa's wish list for the Biden administration: Expectations vs reality’. *Africa Portal*, 30 November 2020. [https://www.africaportal.org/features/africas-wishlist-biden-administration-expectations-vs-reality/?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=36864fb7b5-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2020\\_11\\_30\\_12\\_48&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_e49f63ec5f-36864fb7b5-114508511](https://www.africaportal.org/features/africas-wishlist-biden-administration-expectations-vs-reality/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_campaign=36864fb7b5-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_11_30_12_48&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e49f63ec5f-36864fb7b5-114508511)

<sup>4</sup> ‘Trade in Goods with Africa’, *United States Census*. <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c0013.html>

### 3.3 Asia

Besides China and India, Japan is an established Asian leader in managing a substantial engagement with Africa. It pioneered periodic institutional interaction with the continent through the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) process launched in 1993.

Of late, the Japanese policy is arranging a strategic shift from the ODA-oriented relationship to one where the private sector plays a bigger role. At the TICAD summit in Yokohama in August 2019, former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe spoke of a “New TICAD” with its stress on entrepreneurship and enterprise as well as investment and innovation. “We will do whatever it takes to assist the advancement of Japanese companies in Africa,” he stressed.<sup>5</sup>

Other states of the Asia/Indo-Pacific region actively engaged in Africa today are UAE, Indonesia, South Korea, Singapore and Australia. The pattern of their equations with Africa shows a striking emphasis on the role of private sector players in the deepening and diversification of ties with the continent.

### 3.4 Other players

This miscellaneous category includes Russia, Turkey, Brazil and G20.

The Soviet Union’s role as the No. 2 global power was a significant factor in African affairs during the Cold War years. It disappeared overnight with the dissolution of the USSR. Through President Putin’s visit to South Africa in 2006, Russia announced its return to the continent. A significant milestone in Russia’s return to Africa occurred in October 2019, when the first Russia-Africa summit was held at Sochi.

Russia’s interests are both political and economic. Close ties are seen as a pathway to Moscow’s global role. In the economic domain, Russia has been specifically interested in power, including nuclear energy, mining and extractive industry, oil and gas, agriculture, security cooperation and arms sale. But given its economic weaknesses, Russia is unlikely to emerge as a major player in Africa in the current decade.

Turkey-Africa relations registered considerable progress in recent years, with trade reaching \$24 billion in 2014; Turkey expanding its embassies opening in 26 countries (nearly double the 12 in recent years), and Turkish Airlines flying to 49 destinations in 31 African countries. But the pandemic led to the postponement of the third summit, thus causing a disruption in their dialogue. (The first two summits were held in 2008 and 2014).<sup>6</sup>

Brazil under President Lula da Silva (2003-11) displayed amazing pro-activism in deepening ties not only with Lusophone Africa but with the continent as a whole. His successors let him down, particularly Jair Bolsonaro, president since January 2019, who shows little interest in African affairs.

Finally, the G20, representing two-thirds of the world’s population, should be factored in. In its summit-level declarations during the past decade, the G20 took only peripheral interest in Africa until Germany assumed the presidency in 2017.

Germany conceived the ‘Compact with Africa’ (CwA) initiative, with its primary objective to facilitate increased investment in Africa through substantial improvement in the macro, business and financing framework of the African countries that chose to join the initiative.

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<sup>5</sup> Keynote Address by Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Opening Session of the Seventh Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD 7), 28 August 2019, Yokohama, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/af/af1/page4e\\_001069.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/af/af1/page4e_001069.html).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Turkey-Africa Relations’, Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-africa-relations.en.mfa>

An important motivation for Germany was to help stem the tide of illegal, large-scale migration of people from Africa to Europe around this time. However, CwA was joined by only 12 countries. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the front the question of Africa's indebtedness.

Many African states have been unable to service debts as their economies suffered multiple shocks. The Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), blessed by G20, came to their rescue. Launched in April 2020 and with its validity recently extended till June 2021, DSSI could well be extended again as economic recovery may take longer to produce positive results in Africa.

## 4. Critical analysis

Africa is aptly viewed as the continent of the future: it will be the region with the largest population (2.4 billion by 2050), and its economy is set to scale new heights. But its stability, security, economic growth and progress are by no means guaranteed. Africa's success will depend on the performance of its leaders and elite as well as its external partners. The past two decades have witnessed a sharpening of competition among the external partners, especially between the traditional players (EU, UK, US and Japan) and the emerging economies (China, India, Brazil and others) as well as within the latter group.

Fundamentally, in their endeavours to increase cooperation with Africa, all external partners are guided by a spectrum of motivations, to:

1. Assist in resolving the continent's political, economic and social challenges.
2. Benefit from Africa's markets, minerals, hydrocarbons, natural commodities, vast land and oceanic resources.
3. Seek geopolitical influence.

The exact mix of these motivations varies from country to country. For example, the goal to seek strategic dominance was compelling in the case of colonial or neo-colonial European powers and the U.S. during the Cold War. A similar mindset drives Xi Jinping's China, with its relentless, continent-wide, multi-sectoral strategy to woo Africa. On the other hand, nations such as India, Japan, Australia, Indonesia and Brazil appear to offer genuine partnerships to Africa that promise to be mutually beneficial.

A critical difference lies in the respective approaches of partners towards the issue of Africa's 'agency'. Those seeking dominance believe that they know the best and, therefore, Africa should do as it is told. Those seeking partnership based on equality and mutual respect, are willing to subscribe to the principle of 'African solutions for African problems' and the long-term relevance and efficacy of African 'agency'.

Africa's attitude towards what China offers it today, must be evaluated objectively. It is not all negative; in fact, most African countries welcome China's comprehensive FOCAC model of cooperation. They see more benefits than risks in it. They also believe that China's expansive economic diplomacy increased Africa's value in the world's calculus.

In comparison, a minority of African observers and a sizeable number of experts in the West, India and elsewhere maintain that China's approach is essentially exploitative and colonial in character. Rajen Harshe offered a nuanced evaluation by pointing out that, while China "does display clear imperialist tendencies", its "dominance, as of now, cannot be viewed through conventional categories such as neo-colonialism."<sup>7</sup>

The fundamental commonality in the policies of all external powers is to secure increased economic cooperation with the African countries of their choice.

## 5. Takeaways for India

India is rightly considered as one of the oldest external partners of Africa. Its partnership may be treated as unique, for it existed in the ancient and medieval period of history; it expanded during the colonial era, with a vast number of Indians reaching and settling down in eastern and southern Africa. It received new traction when Africa entered the post-colonial age, with Africa and India becoming comrades in the Non-Aligned Movement and G77, and later as partners and close friends working together for shared global causes in the 21st century.

Since 2008, when the first India-Africa Forum Summit was convened and particularly since 2014, when the Modi government launched a special programme to treat Africa as a high priority, the partnership with Africa has notched up several achievements. This was best reflected in the successful convening of the third India-Africa Forum Summit in 2015 and the series of follow-up actions taken by both sides during the period from 2015 to 2020. The success of the Indian government's initiative to focus on Africa was amply recorded in the agreed outcome of the mid-term review meeting between the Indian and AU officials, held in September 2019.<sup>8</sup>

However, a critical look at the post-pandemic situation in Africa, the escalating international competition involved in building ties with Africa and the present state of India-Africa cooperation, leads us to offer a set of substantive recommendations, as below:

1. Political relations have improved perceptibly, but this is the time to sustain the process, not lower the guard. Therefore, India-Africa Forum summits should be held once in three – not five – years. The fourth summit should be held as soon as possible. Additional adequate financial resources should be arranged for expanding cooperation with Africa.
2. Economic relations should receive the top priority. Despite progress in recent years, economic cooperation stands far below existing potential. India Inc. must listen more to sober voices emanating from Africa, whereas Indian and African governments must exert themselves more to address the concerns and grievances of Indian business and industry. The formation of an 'India-Africa Business Forum' for each of the five regions of Africa should be considered.

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<sup>7</sup> Rajen Harshe, *Africa in World Affairs: Politics of Imperialism, The Cold War and Globalisation*, New York: Routledge, 2019, p. 171.

<sup>8</sup> 'Joint Press Statement by India and the African Union on the Mid-Term Review Meeting of the Strategic Cooperation Framework of India-Africa Forum Summit III', Ministry of External Affairs, 12 September, 2019. <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31819>



3. Multiple sectors of mutual complementarity have emerged, but priority needs to be accorded to the following: healthcare and pharma, agriculture, education and capacity building, energy, digital cooperation especially fintech, trade and investment, and the Blue Economy. Cutting across sectors, technology should be developed as a major pillar of India-Africa collaboration. Each sector needs a detailed action plan, which should be developed through comprehensive consultations with relevant stakeholders.
4. It is highly desirable to impart a 21st century complexion to the partnership with Africa. A sure way to secure this is to deepen cooperation in the domain of space technologies, digital information, and communication technologies. As the Delhi Declaration of October 2015 pointed out, connectivity and access to these technologies would impact a whole range of sectors, empowering the peoples.<sup>9</sup>
5. In this context, a major and recent development was the acquisition of OneWeb, a London-based satellite internet services company, by the British government and India's Bharti Global, a player with a strong footprint in Africa. OneWeb which launched 70 satellites during 2020, and India which undertook significant reforms in its space sector last year, should create new synergy to assist interested African countries in deriving maximum benefit from the marriage of advances in the space and digital domains.<sup>10</sup>
6. Capacity building has rightly been a priority in India-Africa cooperation. However, the flagship programme - India Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) – needs an independent, critical evaluation with a view to making it more modern, effective, and responsive to African needs.
7. Possibilities of trilateral cooperation as a device to meet the China challenge, must be explored with greater vigour and consistency. The obvious candidates for cooperation with India in Africa are the Quad member-states (the US, Japan and Australia), the EU powers such as France and Germany, the UK, and the UAE. As a follow-up to the study by CII<sup>11</sup> a new 'Knowledge Paper' may be commissioned by FICCI and Gateway House, with the specific aim to develop a practical business strategy in consultation with the industry.
8. Business grows in a friendly climate. It is in the interest of business and industry both in India and select African countries, to support endeavors and programmes that help to strengthen dialogue and cooperation between women and youth organisations, universities, think tanks, media and cultural institutions of the two geographies. Governments and the corporate sector should materially assist the 'Third Space' that is geared to expand mutual understanding and friendship at the people-to-people level.
9. Africa is not a country, but a vast continent comprising 54 countries. What drives it and how it operates at various levels is a mystery to all, except a small number of Africanists. Select projects to study the functioning of the African Union, Regional Economic Communities, African Development Bank, New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) etc. should be initiated as part of a 'Know Your Africa' (KYA) campaign. If Gateway House could be provided with adequate resources, it may craft and lead this innovative project of immense importance.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Delhi Declaration 2015' Para 25. [http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/25980\\_declaration.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/25980_declaration.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> For details, see, Chaitanya Giri, 'India, OneWeb and the Queen's stake', Gateway House, 24 December 2020. <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/india-oneweb-queens-stake/>

<sup>11</sup> Gurjit Singh and Jhanvi Tripathi, *India in Africa: Developing Trilateral Partnership*, New Delhi: CII, 2019.

