

Role of India-Africa Partnership Towards Shaping a Multipolar World

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In this insightful interview, Samir Bhattacharya, a research associate at Vivekananda International Foundation, discusses the changing geopolitical situation, how India and Africa are working closely together to support the emerging multipolar world. Kester Kenn Klomegah, the interviewer, further attempted to find out from the academic expert how India and Russia can broad-based collaborate for the betterment of Africa.

Here are the interview excerpts.

Kester Kenn Klomegah (KKK): Do you think there is an increasing need for India and African countries to work more closely, especially in this changing global situation?

Samir Bhattacharya (SB): The world is going through a turbulent time. For about two years, countries across the world suffered from covid and covid-related shutdowns. When the world just started its recovery journey, the war in Ukraine started derailing all the recovery plans. Today, the disastrous impacts of this metastasising conflict have extended beyond the borders of the European continent and are felt throughout the world, even in Africa. Rising food and energy prices, disruptions in the trade of commodities and services, and a sharp humanitarian crisis were brought on by a sharp decline in development funding for Africa.

Furthermore, the continent suffers the most from the detrimental effects of climate change. This crisis also severely impacts the already too-slow, however steady, energy transition program. Given this background, India's contribution to Africa's reconstruction effort would be crucial. Over the years, India's interactions with Africa have grown organically. The key tenets of India's development partnership with Africa have included capacity-building initiatives, lines of credit, grant financing, small-scale development projects, technical advice, disaster relief and humanitarian support, and military cooperation. There is a strong need for India and Africa to work together in this changing global situation.

KKK: What are some of the areas of collaboration that you think India and Africa should

strengthen?

SB: To achieve inclusive growth, Africa requires financial resources. Most small businesses and industries in Africa require urgent access to infrastructure financing, especially in the backdrop of the COVID-19 outbreak and the Russia-Ukraine war. In the absence of adequate local financing sources, the policymakers of the continent are grappling to arrange the finance from different traditional external partners.

Currently, LOCs provided by the Export-Import Bank of India (Indian Exim Bank) is the primary source for India to finance an increasing number of development projects on the African continent. Exim Bank now operates three representative offices in Africa, one each in Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, and South Africa. Over 44 African countries have already been granted an extension of 200 Letters of Credit, totalling about \$12 billion up to May 2021. There are \$2.2 billion in approved Pipelines and \$9.75 billion in active Lines of Credit. Moreover, the Indian Exim Bank recently offered a US\$100 million (Rs 730 crore) credit line to the Africa Finance Corporation (AFC). This funding will aid African governments in building the critical infrastructure required to revive their economies after the COVID-19 outbreak.

India has financed several significant infrastructure projects in Africa. Important African infrastructure projects supported by IFC include the construction of a railway line in Ghana, the provision of blast hole drill and mining equipment to Zimbabwe, the city decongestion project in Zambia, integrated LPG facilities at bitumen storage facilities in Mozambique, and the supply of vehicles and spare parts to Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.

Concerning security, India has always been at the forefront in preparing African countries' military forces for the twenty-first century's security problems. These training programs must include counterinsurgency operations, peacekeeping, marine security, and specialised instruction in emerging fields like drone operations and cyber warfare. Mandates for training citizens in fields like disaster management, humanitarian relief, and medical help must also be included. Although some of these are already included in India's skill development initiatives, they should be pursued more thoroughly and comprehensively.

Furthermore, the continent is lagging in human resource development. As the fourth industrial revolution approaches, skill development in Africa is more important than ever if that continent does not want to fall behind in the new global economy. In fact, if early preparation and a more substantial commitment to its implementation are not made, African countries risk falling behind in the fourth industrial revolution. India's primary method of interaction with Africa has always been capacity building and skill development. India needs to step up its information diplomacy with Africa.

KKK: Do you think of any new and emerging areas of cooperation?

SB: According to the African Union's 2050 Africa's Maritime Strategy, the Africa Blue Economy Strategy (2019), and other continental and regional frameworks, African nations are realising that the blue economy presents an opportunity for Africa to develop new revenue streams that could aid in development and lessen reliance on foreign aid. The SAGAR project and India's draft policy statement on the blue economy align with the African Union's (AU) 2050 Africa's Maritime Strategy and Africa Blue Economy Strategy (2019). India and African nations working together to establish the "Blue Economy" will have both economic and maritime security benefits.

As digitalisation advances and more news and social media outlets, including mobile phones and the Internet, become accessible, Africa is poised for exponential media expansion. There are several print media outlets, radio stations, and roughly 1000 TV channels in Africa. Media connections between Africa and India are essentially nonexistent. There is a significant communication gap here that has to be filled. In order to support the meagre efforts made by a few private TV networks, India could attempt to create a dedicated TV channel that broadcasts content to Africa.

In terms of geoclimatic conditions, biodiversity, physiognomy, people, culture, and family values, India and Africa exhibit significant similarities. Traditional medicinal systems are commonly used to treat patients in India and Africa. India has extensive knowledge, a robust pharmaceutical industry, and a solid industrial foundation. India has one of the most affordable, easily accessible, and high-quality healthcare systems in the world. By 2025, the market for complementary and alternative medicine is anticipated to grow to \$70 billion, according to the Ministry of Ayush. Therefore, collaboration between India and Africa on traditional medicine offers an outstanding prospect.

Every year, Africa loses billions of dollars due to illicit trading of natural resources such as minerals, forestry (and its by-products), oil, fisheries and wildlife sectors. A Reuters research found that every year, gold worth billions of dollars is smuggled out of Africa via the United Arab Emirates in the Middle East, which serves as a gateway to markets in Europe, the United States, and other countries. India can help Africa curb this illegal practice by sharing its experiences to improve data quality and infrastructure, skills and resources, as well as provide training to the national statistics office. Thus, some of the above-mentioned requisite finances can be raised by plugging the hole.

KKK: By the way what has been achieved since the last India-Africa summit? Do you also think there have been a number of challenges and setbacks since then?

SB: The aim, methodology, and development cooperation strategies with Africa have drastically changed since the last India Africa summit in 2015. The main modifications are as follows: increased attention paid to Africa's development agenda; modifications made to the mechanics and procedures for carrying out LoC projects; development of new financing mechanisms; active participation of the private sector; new approaches taken to capacity building programs; increased participation of civil society organisations in capacity building; digital capacity building initiatives; priority given to partnering with multilateral organisations; and trilateral cooperation.

Unfortunately, many ongoing development activities were affected by the COVID-19 epidemic. On the positive side, due to COVID-19, digital initiatives with a particular emphasis on healthcare and education have accelerated. In light of this, India's Pan African e-Network Project has added a new dimension to make tele-medicine and tele-education accessible in most African nations. In October 2019, it was re-launched as e-Aarogya Bharati to utilise the 15,000 scholarships offered to African students between 2019 and 2024. In order to train African healthcare practitioners, India has uniquely offered COVID-19 management practices and training webinars. Through these projects, India has helped strengthen Africa's capability in the health and education sectors.

KKK: In your opinion, what can be done to increase trade and economic relations between the two continents?

SB: Trade and investment are the principal tenets of the economic partnership between India and Africa, and over the previous two decades, significant progress has been made in this regard. Indian trade with Africa is valued at USD 98 billion in 2022-2023 compared to USD 89.6 billion the year before. For Indian manufacturers of items like textiles, pharmaceuticals, cars, and light machinery, Africa is a sizable unexplored market. Additionally, it provides potential in the resource and energy industries, which have historically been India's weak points. Together, India and Africa must develop short- and long-term goals that are in line with the actual needs of the African states.

Under the AfCFTA, local supply chains and regional production networks will emerge as significant markets for Indian investments and exports. By developing a legal system that forges a unique connection between the AfCFTA and India, India should actively investigate how it might benefit from the agreement. A similar structure will benefit Africa and give Indian businesses easy access to a single continental market, broadening India's economic relationship with Africa.

KKK: Where do you see India-Africa relations, at least, in the next five years? Do India and Africa share common grounds for the emerging multipolar world?

SB: Regarding geopolitics, the world is at a turning point where multipolarity is quickly replacing US unipolarity. Both India and Africa are devoted to their cooperation to establish a multipolar world order in this rapidly changing globe. In truth, both India and Africa are working to create a multipolar world that rejects great power politics, represents contemporary diversity, and depends on broad-based collaboration. India sees Africa's rise as essential to balance the world's power structure. Going forward, both bilaterally and in multilateral platforms like the BRICS, the G20, and others, India will collaborate with African nations to promote inclusive and decentralised economic practices to secure global political democratisation.

India is committed to establishing a development alliance with Africa based on the participating nations' needs and goals. Some of the shared interests include fighting terrorism, protecting the environment, combating climate change, protecting cyberspace, protecting human health and food, protecting energy supplies, and creating resilient supply chains. These are a few areas where cooperation has a lot of potential. In line with the urgent concerns of Africa, India's development partnership with Africa is anticipated to place a strong emphasis on digital, green, healthcare, food security, and water during the next five to ten years.

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