

India-Africa Connect:New Horizons, New Vistas

By Manish Chand

Africa Day is celebrated across the world on May 25 to mark the foundation of the Organisation of African Unity and the continent's liberation from imperialism and colonialism. This year, months before the annual commemorative day, in India a special "Africa Day," was organised in the country's western state Gujarat, home of Mahatma Gandhi, on January 19. The Africa Day, held as part of the Vibrant Gujarat annual business conclave, was attended by a host of African ministers and leaders, including AU chair and Rwanda's President Paul Kagame. The decision to dedicate a day to an entire continent at a global conclave signalled the rising profile of the resurgent African continent in India's diplomatic calculus.

Interlinked Resurgence

The Africa Day function was not a feel-good ceremony, but it symbolised the blossoming of India-Africa partnership that has branched out and bloomed in all areas, specially in the last few years. Intertwining dreams and aspirations of over two billion people of India and Africa, this mutually empowering and enriching partnership intersects the ongoing resurgence of the twin growth poles of the world. The economic outlook for Sub-Saharan Africa, home to the world's fastest growing economies, is getting better by the day. The region is expected to grow at the rate of over 4 per cent at a time of global economic uncertainty, according to the IMF and World Bank. India, separated from Africa by warm waters of the Indian Ocean, has emerged as the world's sixth largest economy and is currently the world's fastest growing major economy. This conjoined resurgence, complemented by ideals of South-South cooperation and a shared history of struggle against colonialism and injustice, has translated into a visible intensification of diplomatic outreach and economic diplomacy.

Enhanced Diplomatic Outreach

Two-way diplomatic interactions between India and Africa have acquired an unprecedented intensity: 29 visits from India to African countries at the level of President, Vice President and Prime Minister, apart from several Ministerial visits, have taken place in less than five years. Besides hosting the largest gathering of African leaders on the Indian soil at the Third India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS-III), in which 41 Heads of State/Heads of Government participated, India rolled out the red carpet for over 35 leaders from Africa and several ministers in the last four years. India's diplomatic footprints in a rising continent are set to expand with the government's decision to open 18 new Embassies and High Commissions in Africa in the next few years, which will take the number of Indian Missions in the continent to 47. The first of these Missions has already been opened in Rwanda last year.

Business Bonding

Enhanced diplomatic outreach has dovetailed with growing economic synergies. Afro-optimism is the dominant sentiment among the Indian business community looking for new opportunities to invest in the continent. Propelled by economic and governance reforms, many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have emerged as investment hubs, exhibiting enhanced ease of doing business. The signing of the historic African Continental Free Trade Agreement in March last year promises to be a game-changer in spurring economic integration and transforming fortunes of the entire continent.

Aided by these positive trends, India-Africa bilateral trade reached \$62.66 billion for 2017-18, marking an increase of nearly 22 % over the previous year. India is now ranked as the third largest export destination in Africa.

India's Duty-Free Tariff Preference (DFTP) Scheme for Least Developed Countries has extended duty-free access to 98.2% of the country's total tariff lines, with 38 African countries now enjoy the benefits of our DFTP Scheme.

Indian investment in Africa have shown an ascending curve, with India emerging as the 5th largest investor in Africa with cumulative investments of US\$ 54 billion. Indian investments span diverse sectors, including telecommunication, hydrocarbon, exploration, agriculture, Education, petroleum refining and retail, IT services, chemicals, drugs and pharmaceuticals, automobiles.

Looking ahead, there are huge opportunities for enhanced partnership in areas of high-tech manufacturing, digital economy, minerals and mining, IT and innovation. Given overwhelmingly young and tech-savvy population of the continent, empowering GenNext through tie-ups in new technologies is the next frontier. In areas of health, education and other niche areas of knowledge economy, India-Africa partnership is gaining a new traction through new initiatives and joint ventures. In this context, an Agreement was signed in September 2018 to establish e-Vidhya Bharati Aarogya Bharati (e-VBAB) Network Project between India and Africa, which aims to provide tele-education and tele-medicine to African countries.

Development Partnership

Animated by ideals of South-South cooperation, development cooperation remains the cornerstone of the India-Africa partnership. India has anchored its development partnership with Africa on the principles of equality, mutual respect and mutual benefit. “We take pride in our model of cooperation with Africa which is demand-driven, consultative, participative, involves local resources, builds capacity and is based on Africa’s own prioritisation of its needs,” India’s External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj said at the Africa Day celebrations in Ahmedabad on January 19. At IAFS-III, India pledged \$10 billion in Lines of Credit for diverse development projects across the continent. Currently, 189 projects in 42 African countries for nearly USD 11.4 billion are being implemented under Indian LoCs. These projects, encompassing a wide array of areas such as power generation and distribution, water related projects, especially in rural areas, agriculture, irrigation, railways, sugar plants, infrastructure and ICT, are transforming lives of people in Africa in myriad ways.

New Vistas

Clean & Green is set to be the new mantra of India-Africa partnership. The sun is shining on the fortunes of India and Africa, both literally and metaphorically. And green is the new mantra of this shared quest for green growth and sustainable development. In this context, the growing India-Africa partnership in solar energy through the International Solar Alliance has paved the way for forging a multi-faceted green partnership which is set to enhance the quality of life people lead in India and Africa. Blue Economy is another promising area of partnership between India and African countries.

As India and Africa raise the ambition for their partnership, promoting regional connectivity and integration will be a game-changer. Africa Asia Growth Corridor is an idea, whose time has come, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said. Both India and Japan, which are partnering in AAGC, have unveiled a series of steps to implement this defining corridor, which aligns with Africa's vision of its own resurgence, as encapsulated in African Agenda 2063.

The Way Ahead

Going forward, the India-Africa partnership will dovetail with African Agenda 2063 that encapsulates the essence of Africa-driven and Africa-owned resurgence. India, as a committed partner of Africa, will do everything possible to spur the realisation of African Development Bank's High 5s: "Light up and power Africa; Feed Africa; Industrialize Africa; Integrate Africa; and Improve the quality of life for the people of Africa."

In the final reckoning, the success of India-Africa partnership will be measured by the scale and skill with which it visibly transforms people's lives. Outlining 10 principles of engagement with Africa, Prime Minister Modi, in his address to the Ugandan parliament, said memorably that the overarching thrust of India's partnership will be on liberating African potential and not constraining African future.

In the end, it's not just commerce and geopolitical calculations that will propel India-Africa relations. Transactional relations, after all, have limitations. India-Africa relations, in many ways, are special as they are rooted in connections of heart and mind that go back centuries. The Mahatma-Madiba connect serves as a robust foundation for India-Africa partnership that has acquired a new momentum amid a shifting world order. The 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi and the 100th birth anniversary of the iconic African leader Nelson Mandela is a reminder that shared civilizational values will continue to provide spiritual fuel to power India-Africa partnership to new heights.

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