

COMMENT

## A new tryst with Africa

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**India's expanding naval and commercial strategy needs to be aligned with the east coast of Africa if it is to succeed as a shaper of stability and peace in the Indian Ocean region.**



Prime Minister Narendra Modi's **>four-nation tour of Africa from July 7-11 is a historic visit** that adds new dimensions to his motto of India as a “leading power” in the world. It provides high-level gravitas to crucial bilateral relationships with long-term consequences for India’s strategic, economic and soft power ambitions.

Mr. Modi is renowned for setting foot on countries which have almost forgotten what it

one-on-one cooperation. By undertaking dedicated bilateral missions to key nations of southern Africa, Mr. Modi is signalling that he values these countries intrinsically for what they are.



Sreeram Chaulia

**Securing the east coast** One of the hallmarks of Mr. Modi's foreign policy is an emphasis on defence diplomacy to boost India's position as a net security provider for fellow developing countries. The choice of the four nations on his itinerary this week is not a coincidence but part of a well-thought-out doctrine of giving primacy to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), whose westernmost edge is defined by these countries.

The east coast of Africa is the flank which India's expanding naval and commercial strategy needs to be aligned with if it is to emerge as a shaper of stability and peace in the IOR. Mr. Modi's government purposefully restarted serious defence dialogue with Mozambique in 2015 after years of neglect. I recall meeting the Deputy Minister of National Defence of Mozambique, Patricio Jose, earlier this year where he said that they are "eagerly looking up to India" to enhance their coastal surveillance, military training and maritime security capabilities.

>**Mr. Modi's mega-modernisation project of 'Sagar Mala'**, which involves coastal area development, port infrastructure advancement, connectivity and sea-based industrial synergies, is not merely a domestic policy priority but interlinked to our strategic drive to be the defence and logistical partner for Africa's eastern coast.

and ramped up India's security assistance there. Now, by drawing in countries of east Africa into a trustful embrace where they have faith in India to share and transmit sensitive technology and know-how in intelligence, reconnaissance and training, he is making a proactive push to be not merely an economic actor on the continent but a political one too.

**The economic outreach** Economics is, of course, never off the agenda when India interacts with Africa. But here, too, what is new is how Mr. Modi's flagship 'Make in India' campaign has the whole of Africa excited. With the Chinese economy in slowdown and its absorption rates for African minerals at a low point, African governments and people are on the lookout for an alternative big Asian power that can generate steady export revenues for them and also help them industrialise. India appears to many Africans as a preferred, democratic partner whose outreach is not totally state-driven (unlike China) and whose private sector is increasing its footprint on the continent. The Prime Minister's personal interest in connecting Indian agribusinesses with African nations for food security, and also in joint exploration and harnessing of energy sources, is a big draw in Africa.

Some cynical sections of the Western commentariat club India in the same category as China, i.e. as a mineral-grabber that is out to plunder Africa and denude it of its vast natural wealth. The message sent out by the Prime Minister's team ahead of his visit to the continent is that "we are not here to exploit" and "we want to be partners in development."

I was quizzed about this developmental intent of India during a recent public lecture in the Ministry of Statistics of the Government of South Africa in Pretoria. The question was: "You say India is only here to help build our human resources and beef up our security. But no country does charity. Why is India doing these things? What are its real motives?"

Mr. Modi needs to satisfy this critical line of inquiry by not only offering more novel schemes that bring Indian technical and educational expertise to Africa but also by showing how co-dependent India and Africa are in the twenty-first century. We need export markets as we industrialise, and Africa has the youthful demography and the rising purchasing power that will eventually take our two-way trade from \$72 billion to \$700 billion or more. Unless Africa grows in wealth, stability and confidence, we will be handicapped. Unless Africa is with us on the big crises facing the planet, we can never turn into a great power in world politics. Our fates are thus intertwined not just due to geography, identical views at the United Nations or common historical experiences as colonised people, but also because of the fundamental complementarity of the future that awaits both sides.

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Africa. But the absence of a human resource component, a transparency element, and a social sector or democracy angle in that model means that India has an indispensable place on the continent. We already enjoy a special place in the hearts of African people going back centuries. What Mr. Modi's sojourn to the continent can do is to embed India in the futuristic minds, pocketbooks and dreams of Africa.

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