

# India's multidimensional engagements with the African union (AU): ambiguities and potentialities (2002-2024)

## Abstract

The objective of this essay is to examine the changes in the relationship between India and the African Union (AU) since 2002. The orientation of this relationship is dependent on interdependency. The application of soft power is considered crucial in their engagement. The India-African Union relations have been affected by the influence of China and other contentious issues. The African Union plays a significant role in India's energy security and strategic calculations. This paper will mainly discuss India's increasing synergies and engagement issues with the African Union. The method used in this study will be content analysis.

**Keywords:** African union, India, soft power, diaspora, energy security, strategic

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## Introduction

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) was established in the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, in May 1963 to address the diverse regional needs of African nations. In 2002, during the Durban Conference, the OAU underwent a name change to become the African Union (AU). The primary objectives of the AU's inception were centered on regional development. Among the 55 member countries of the AU, three nations are currently suspended. Morocco initially withdrew from the AU in 1984 due to conflicting interests but later rejoined in 2017. South Sudan, having recently gained independence from Sudan, became a member of the African Union in 2011. Africa, known as the world's poorest continent, faces a multitude of common challenges such as poverty, hunger and illiteracy, violence, and refugee crises, in addition to various complex obstacles. These obstacles include the recruitment of child soldiers, forced labor, human trafficking, civilian massacres, drug trafficking, money laundering, illegal arms trade, and overall underdevelopment.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa represents a significant challenge that member states of the African Union (AU) must confront.<sup>1</sup> Established in 2001, the AU aimed to address the challenges encountered by its predecessor organization. While it sought to reinstate the foundational principles of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) with some modifications, the Constitutive Act, along with subsequent legislative and political frameworks, introduced additional elements.<sup>2</sup> The AU's inability to effectively protect human rights within its member states has prompted critiques likening it to "new wine in old bottles." Human security violation is a very common issue for many African nations. Countries like Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, and Sudan have been facing human security crises.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the relationship between India and the AU is characterized by a range of complexities, ambiguities, and opportunities.

## Principles and objectives of AU

The Charter of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) encapsulated the essential principles guiding member states in their collaborative efforts across scientific, economic, social, and cultural

domains. Key values enshrined in the Charter include the principle of non-interference in the internal matters of other nations, the recognition of sovereign equality, and the preservation of the territorial integrity of Member States. The African Union (AU) was established with several primary objectives:

- To foster unity and mutual support among African nations.
- To enhance coordination and collaboration aimed at improving the welfare of the continent's populace.
- To safeguard their independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.
- To eradicate all remnants of colonialism from the African continent.
- To promote international cooperation with full respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Charter.
- To promote economic integration and sustainable development in Africa across economic, social, and cultural spheres.
- To foster cooperation in all human activities aimed at enhancing the standard of living for African inhabitants.
- To align and harmonize the strategies of existing and future Regional Economic Communities towards the gradual realization of the union's objectives.
- To engage with relevant international partners in combating preventable diseases and promoting health and well-being across the continent.

## Structure of the AU

The entire activities of AU are run by several institutions and administrative bodies. The prime institutions of the AU are:

- The Assembly
- The Executive Council (EC)
- The Commission.

Apart from these three, there are other important institutions and bodies like The Pan-African Parliament, The African Court of Justice, The Permanent Representative Commission, The Economic, Social and Cultural Council, The Financial Institutions, etc. In the institutional hierarchy, the Assembly is an apex point. The meeting of the Assembly is usually held once a year to make policy decisions for AU. The Executive Council is the second highest body which comprises foreign ministers and other ministers of the member countries. The key responsibility of this body is to implement the decisions of the Assembly. The EC members meet twice a year. The Commission is the third-height body of AU which was previously known as the Secretariat. It supervises the activities of the AU throughout the year.<sup>4</sup>

The Chairperson of the Commission is the administrative head of the AU and previously the Chairperson was known as the Secretary-General. Apart from the core structure, there are several specialized agencies of AU. The Pan-African Parliament is the common legislative body for AU members. Its head office is situated at Midrand, South Africa and it is comprised of 265 elected members. In 1994, by Abuja Treaty the African Economic Community (AEC) had been established. However, AU has the following specialized agencies for performing multi-dimensional activities:

- a) African Accounting Council
- b) African Bureau for Educational Sciences
- c) African Civil Aviation Commission
- d) Pan-African News Agency
- e) Pan-African Postal Union
- f) Pan-African Railways Union
- g) Pan-African Telecommunications Union
- h) Supreme Council for Sports in Africa.

## The basic differences between OAU and AU

The AU is the successive organization of the OAU. In the beginning, the OAU had to face a lot of challenges like de-colonization, anti-apartheid, political and economic integration of the African Continent, boundary conflicts among the members, civil wars, etc. Despite many limitations, the OAU facilitated several African states to gain their independence. OAU concentrates on basically socio-political issues of the member countries, but AU deals with economic issues. AU aims to establish a monetary union just like the EU and also emphasizes FTA. AU is sharing the new hope for the economically poor African Continent whereas OAU is not able to ensure economic stability for the AU members.

## Challenges

Since its establishment, AU has faced a series of challenges. Initially, the organization struggled to garner sufficient support for its decisions, largely due to the frequent policy changes resulting from military coups in multiple member states.<sup>5</sup> Moreover; many AU members prioritize sovereignty and non-interference over human rights concerns, with some members having poor human rights records. Unequal access to food remains a significant issue in Africa, particularly affecting millions of individuals in Somalia and the Horn of Africa. Lastly, AU has been involved in political issues such as opposing autocratic regimes and acting as a mediator in numerous civil conflicts and political crises across countries like Guinea, Niger, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and other African Arab states.

Economic issues in Africa are multifaceted, including the imperative to improve the living conditions of millions of underprivileged and uninformed citizens, the low levels of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the heavy debt burdens faced by many African nations, and the ongoing disputes regarding regional currencies.

In addition, ecological challenges are prevalent, manifesting in recurrent famines, desertification, and insufficient ecological sustainability. Another significant challenge for the African Union (AU) is the lack of unified decision-making processes. Numerous African countries continue to have affiliations with their former colonial powers, which can lead to conflicting loyalties between the AU and these historical entities. The ideological diversity among member states further complicates the ability to reach a consensus on critical issues. Seventhly, their inability to fulfill their obligations to the organization was due to the economic recession and substantial debt burdens that afflict many African countries. Consequently, the lack of financial support also hinders the AU's ability to execute its activities. Additionally, the economic well-being of the majority of member states is heavily dependent on external actors, particularly the nations that previously colonized them. Lastly, persistent health challenges stemming from conflicts, such as combating malaria and the AIDS/HIV crisis, inadequate access to clean water, malnutrition, and substandard sanitation facilities, continue to plague the region.<sup>5</sup>

## Achievements of AU

- a) Several AU members possess excess food resources and are capable of sustaining themselves. These countries have made significant strides in improving their agricultural industries by working closely with other AU institutions. The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) played a pivotal role in facilitating economic growth.
- b) African nations have successfully negotiated multiple regional agreements, with a considerable number of states being part of more than one agreement.
- c) African heads of state have endorsed a significant number of regional integration pacts and have recognized regional integration as a fundamental component of their economic development strategies.
- d) AU's achievement includes the establishment of the African Human Rights Commission in Banjul, which has played a significant role in advancing the rights of people and human rights across the continent.
- e) By providing diplomatic support and allocating financial, military, and logistical assistance to liberation movements, the AU has successfully overseen the decolonization processes in Namibia and Zimbabwe
- f) African refugees have been granted access to employment opportunities and educational resources, in addition to the recognition of refugee status and the right to asylum by all independent African nations.
- g) The African Union (AU), succeeding the OAU, is dedicated to addressing the needs of its member states and promoting unity and solidarity among African nations.

## India's linkage with AU

"India's interest in and ability to engage with Africa was limited. Interest in the region had waned because the country was in no position to provide substantial economic assistance, the region did not directly

impinge on India's immediate concerns, and its lack of integration into the global economic order ensured that the possibilities of trade and commercial ties were also small".<sup>6</sup>

India's diplomatic and economic linkages with the members of the African Union (AU) were neglected until the 1990s. India's foreign policy towards the African continent gained momentum after 1991. India had paid importance to Africa during the Nehruvian period based on an idealistic point of view. The spirit of NAM, Third World solidarity, anti-colonial struggle, anti-racial movement, and poverty altogether became the connecting factors between India and Africa. The roots of Indo-African relations had started more than 2000 years ago. The ancient Indian merchants used to trade with African territories. During the British rule in India, thousands of Native Indians were sent to several British colonies in the African continent as the labor force. The native Indians became gradually a very important part of many African countries. The long-standing collaboration and the historical and civilizational connections between Africa and India, particularly in their shared endeavors for independence, equality, human rights, freedom, and democracy, have persisted for decades.

## Diplomatic relations

The influence of the Gandhian movement in South Africa continues to impact African governments. African society has greatly benefited from Gandhi's ideas, and his ideology played a significant role in the liberation efforts of key African leaders, including Tanzania's Kwame Nyerere and Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda. India's relationship with AU members took on a more pragmatic perspective after 1991, and reciprocity has been the cornerstone of the interaction pattern between India and AU. However, nearly all African countries that are members of the AU have started to consider India as a potential ally, driven by India's growing economic growth and advancements in science and technology, healthcare, education, and agriculture. The conceptual basis of the relationship between India and the African Union is rooted in their common historical background, the struggle for decolonization, and Nehru's *Panchsheel* policy advocating peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding. Additionally, the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in 1955 serves as another fundamental aspect of the Indo-African ties.

During a state visit from July 23 to July 27, 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi traveled to Rwanda, Uganda, and South Africa. These visits underscored the deepening cooperation between India and various African nations, particularly in trade and agriculture. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Rwanda on July 23 was historic as he became the first Indian prime minister to do so. His agenda included a one-on-one meeting with Rwandan President Paul Kagame and bilateral discussions with a high-level delegation. The focus of the talks was on strengthening the strategic partnership between the two countries. Over the past two decades, diplomatic relations between India and Africa have witnessed significant growth. In the last 17 years, efforts to enhance diplomatic engagement and exchanges have become increasingly sophisticated, as demonstrated by the establishment of the India-Africa Forum Summits in 2008. Nonetheless, there has been persistent criticism regarding the superficial nature of this governmental involvement, which has not been adequately sustained between the rare high-level summits.<sup>7</sup>

As part of its peacekeeping efforts, the United Nations Organization (U.N.O.) has requested for Indian troops to be deployed to various African nations such as the Congo, Mali, South Sudan, and Somalia, among others. India's aspiration to secure a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council necessitates the support

of member nations of the African Union (AU). Currently, India is actively engaging in diplomatic dialogues with African countries. Both India and Africa are keen on shaping the emerging international frameworks, particularly those related to food security, energy, water resources, cyberspace, climate change, and sustainable development. However, there exist two primary challenges in this regard:

- a) Neither Africa nor India can unilaterally influence these global regimes. Significant differences in perspectives on various issues, including climate change, exist between India and AU member states.
- b) Both parties must identify and address the underlying concerns to move forward effectively.

## India's soft power diplomacy

India's strategic approach towards African Union nations has been partially facilitated by the presence of Indian Diasporas in the African continent. The intricate nature of the Indian diaspora in Africa poses a complex challenge. India's commitment to fostering soft power relations with AU member states is evident. The deepening ties between India and Africa extend beyond mere economic transactions to encompass developmental initiatives and the projection of soft power.<sup>8</sup> The Indian diaspora in Africa serves as a crucial link in strengthening India's connections with the African Union. Through the dissemination of Gandhian principles of non-violence, Indian practices such as yoga and Ayurveda, as well as the promotion of Indian cinema and sports, India effectively exercises 'soft diplomacy' with AU members.

## Economic engagements

Africa is currently the location of six out of the top ten economies in terms of growth rate globally. These economies have a combined revenue exceeding \$1 trillion and are home to more than 400 businesses with annual sales of \$1 billion or more. According to Sharma,<sup>9</sup> household consumption in Africa is projected to reach \$2.5 trillion by 2030, with an impressive annual growth rate of 3.9%. India's economic policies and liberalization efforts, initiated in 1991, have strengthened its economic relations with other regions across the globe, as highlighted by Nandy.<sup>10</sup> The trade dynamics between India and Africa have evolved significantly over time, influenced by changing factors and overarching trade objectives. Throughout the 1990s, both regions saw an uptick in trade volumes and broadened their trade offerings as a result of their endeavors to diversify trade and decrease their dependence on longstanding trade partners. The pharmaceutical industry anticipates collaboration in the development of accessible generic drugs and medical facilities. Electrical equipment and gear aid in the transmission of technologies and bolster capacity. The establishment of assembly plants in Africa by Indian automakers contributes to the advancement of the automotive and transportation sectors.<sup>11</sup>

India's economic liberalization has led to the establishment of economic ties with African nations.<sup>10,12</sup> Indian products are in high demand among African consumers, particularly pharmaceuticals from companies like Cipla and Ranbaxy, which offer low-cost generic medications to countries in the African Union. In addition to pharmaceuticals, India also supplies technology, IT services, automobiles, motorcycles, chemicals, and food grains to African nations. On the other hand, India is a major importer of gold, diamonds, minerals, and mines from Africa. The trade between India and Africa has seen a significant increase in recent years, with the annual commerce volume currently standing at \$70 billion. India is

now Africa's fourth-largest commercial partner. Instead of providing handouts, India has chosen to finance initiatives in Africa and has refrained from supporting predatory African regimes that could hinder governance improvements.<sup>13</sup>

Africa and India have significantly enhanced their economic ties, with trade between the two reaching \$75 billion in the 2023–24 fiscal year up until February, and \$100 billion in the 2022–23 fiscal year. This accounts for more than ten percent of all goods traded by India. India has consistently offered technical assistance, scholarships, and capacity-building programs to support Africa's development.<sup>11</sup> The strengthening of bilateral relations has been greatly facilitated by the exchange of knowledge in various fields such as renewable energy, healthcare, education, and agriculture. The Export-Import Bank of India (Exim Bank), one of India's major foreign financial institutions, has provided approximately \$11.2 billion in lines of credit (LoCs) to African countries for 197 projects until February 15, 2024, as part of India's development cooperation with these nations.<sup>14</sup>

### Energy security

India has significantly increased its imports of coal, natural gas, and oil from AU members as part of its strategy to address the escalating energy crisis. ONGC Videsh has already commenced oil and gas exploration activities in various African countries. Despite announcing a substantial \$250 billion investment in Sudan's oil sector, production delays resulting from conflicts between South Sudan and Sudan have raised concerns (Biswas, 2015). The recent surge in India's dependence on oil from African nations can be attributed to the country's economic liberalization process that began in the early 1990s.<sup>15</sup> India's foreign policy has been influenced by its interest in African governments, primarily due to the abundant natural resources, particularly oil and gas, that these nations possess. Indian policymakers are cognizant of the potential opportunities that the African market presents.

### Security issue

The African continent is facing a new wave of security concerns that not only pose a significant risk to the countries within it but also to India. International terrorism is a serious risk for India and other AU countries. The proliferation of terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), Ansari Dine, Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in Africa (MUJAO), Boko Haram, and others through an international network poses a serious threat to the increasing terrorism in Nigeria, Somalia, Kenya, Mali, and other African states. There have been intense accusations against Iran and Pakistan for recruiting jihadists in Africa. Localized terrorist organizations like Al Shabab, which is linked to al-Qaeda, and militant organizations in the Afghan-Pakistan region may not directly affect India, but they could significantly impact India's future security.<sup>16</sup>

India's need to expand its sources of oil imports is driven by the growing strategic importance of the continent and the increasing energy demands of the nation. Singh<sup>17</sup> highlights that Africa holds 8% of the World's confirmed oil reserves, 7.8% of global natural gas reserves, and approximately 6% of global coal reserves. Presently, India imports around 24% of Nigeria's crude oil exports. India is actively involved in the hydrocarbon industry in various African countries such as Sudan, Nigeria, Libya, Egypt, Gabon, and Congo.<sup>18</sup>

India has trained multiple Nigerian Army Chiefs, and Delhi is prioritizing the expansion of joint military drills with African countries. The security of the African continent is at risk due to terrorism,

external forces, and armaments. India has pledged to strengthen the national security of AU members. India has a firm stance on African security, arguing that adequate mandates and funding are essential for special political missions and peacekeeping efforts.<sup>19</sup>

To address the issue of international terrorism, the African Union and India have chosen to collaborate. Given the mutual threats of terrorism and piracy, India is reportedly seeking to enhance its military partnerships with various African nations to serve as a comprehensive security provider for the continent. In pursuit of this objective, India has established defense alliances with countries such as Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Zambia, to extend similar agreements to additional nations across Africa. Notably, India has provided military training in several African nations and has played a significant role in developing an air force in Ghana. Additionally, India has been instrumental in the establishment of an air force, a defense academy, and a naval war college in Ethiopia.

### India's assistance to AU

India has been actively engaged in enhancing the skills and abilities of young people in member countries of the African Union. A substantial amount of \$500 billion has been earmarked by India for the development of human resources and capabilities. More than 15,000 African students have successfully completed their education and training at esteemed Indian universities. The Indian government is extending various scholarships to African students, with member states of the African Union being eligible to apply for these scholarships through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program. Moreover, India is providing assistance to African nations through the Special Commonwealth Africa Assistance Plan and has been offering technical support in various capacities. During the Third India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS III) in October 2015, India pledged US\$ 600 million in grant assistance, which includes funding for the India-Africa Development Fund and the India-Africa Health Fund. Additionally, India has committed to providing US\$10 billion in Lines of Credit (LOCs) on concessional terms.

As of March 2021, Africa had recorded nearly 4 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, with the majority of cases reported in countries such as South Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Nigeria, and Kenya. India, with a population of almost 1.3 billion people, has been facing its own challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these difficulties, the country has showcased its ability to support its allies and has been actively involved in supplying medicines and generic pharmaceuticals to other nations since the onset of the pandemic. India has distributed test kits, hydroxychloroquine and paracetamol tablets, as well as other medical supplies.

Niger, located in Sub-Saharan Africa and predominantly French-speaking, has secured a funding package of \$50 million from India, which was utilized to support the recent African Union (AU) conference held over the past weekend. This marks the first instance of India providing financial assistance for an AU summit. Additionally, as part of this funding initiative, India is developing a conference center in Niger. This endeavor aligns with India's broader strategy to establish convention centers key infrastructure projects previously managed by China across 20 nations in Africa. To facilitate the hosting of certain summit events, a section of the conference center has been constructed on a military installation. Furthermore, as part of its grant initiative, India is also setting up the Centre for Geo-Informatics Applications in Rural Development (CGARD) in the capital city of Niamey.

## Multidimensional cooperation

The first India-Africa Summit was held in New Delhi in April 2008, with the participation of only 14 African states. The “Delhi Declaration” presented the “outline of Africa-India Framework for Cooperation,” which included India’s commitment to expanding its credit line to African nations. In 2011, the second India-Africa Forum Summit took place, where a decision was made to prioritize the IT industry and establish new IT training facilities in AU member countries India. Angola received loan lines of \$700 million and \$30 million from India to set up an industrial development park.<sup>20</sup> India has launched various initiatives across Africa, providing development aid to Senegal and allocating funds for the country’s railway development. Additionally, India has invested in building rail lines in Algeria, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, and Zambia. India’s engagement with the AU has been enhanced in various sectors, including agricultural research in Horticulture, Crop Science, Fisheries, Animal Science, Agricultural Engineering, and Natural Resource Management. During her visit from March 11 to 13, 2024, Indian President Draupadi Murmu characterized Mauritius as “a close maritime neighbor, a valued partner in the Indian Ocean Region, and a significant contributor to our outreach in Africa.” This visit, facilitated by Indian cooperation, resulted in the inauguration of 14 community development initiatives and the laying of the foundation stone for a forensic science laboratory. Furthermore, India and the African Union have enhanced their collaborative efforts in the realm of environmental sustainability.<sup>21</sup>

## China factor

India faces a substantial threat from the growing influence of China in Africa. The relationship between China and India within the African Union is of great importance. The economic expansion policy pursued by China poses a major obstacle for India. Despite India’s assertion that China is not a direct competitor, the significant investments and large workforce deployed by China in Africa to secure market access and energy resources present a formidable challenge for India. Particularly in the energy sector, India struggles to keep up with China’s dominance. The increased involvement of China and India in Africa marks a significant development in the continent’s international relations post-Cold War era. However, there is a risk that this approach may overlook important nuances and potential differences in how India and China engage with Africa today.<sup>23</sup>

## Area of irritants

The connection between African individuals and the illegal trade of drugs in India has led to strained relations between the two regions. Many drug traffickers from African Union nations are frequently apprehended in various parts of India, causing significant concern for the Indian government. India has consistently communicated its concerns to the corresponding African nations, initiating discussions on the need for coordinated efforts to combat smuggling. The Indian Ocean has become a hub for Somali pirates and criminals, prompting the Indian Navy to rescue several foreign ships from these threats. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken the initiative to establish a forum of littoral governments in the Indian Ocean, including members of the African Union, to address the issue of sea piracy. Additionally, there have been unfortunate incidents of attacks against African students in India during 2017 and 2018, drawing criticism from AU countries. Despite these challenges, efforts are being made to rapidly enhance trading relations between the two continents.<sup>24,25</sup>

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## Conclusion

India’s trade relations with Africa have evolved beyond textile yarn exports to encompass a wide range of products such as manufactured goods, chemicals, petroleum products, and pharmaceuticals. The ten principles outlined by Prime Minister Modi in 2018 regarding India’s engagement with Africa were well-received by the AU Delegation. The Indian diaspora in Africa has played a significant role in contributing to the development of the region, leading to expressions of deep appreciation from the African side. Discussions between the two parties emphasized collaboration in key areas such as health and continental projects, aligning with the African Union’s Agenda 2063. Additionally, both parties explored opportunities for cooperation in emerging fields like conventional medicine, digital technology, and solar energy. India expressed gratitude for the strong support received from Africa for the International Solar Alliance, highlighting the importance of this partnership. It was mutually decided by both parties that progress would be periodically assessed through collaborative monitoring procedures that were established. India’s extensive relationship with the African continent has experienced numerous fluctuations. India is now presented with the opportunity to access the markets of AU countries. The current AU nations play a vital role in ensuring India’s energy security. India must handle its interactions with AU countries with utmost care. Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India underscored his nation’s unwavering commitment to strengthening ties with Africa and its persistent efforts to secure the African Union’s permanent membership in the G-20.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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