

India–Africa Partnership in the Indo-Pacific: Significance for the Global South

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This study examines the evolving India–Africa partnership within the Indo-Pacific framework and assesses its significance for the Global South in a context of intensifying geopolitical competition. It analyzes the ways in which India and African countries cooperate in areas such as trade, maritime security, and institutional development, and evaluates whether this partnership contributes to enhancing the collective agency of the Global South and fostering a more inclusive and multipolar regional order. Anchored in liberal institutionalist theory, the article conceptualizes the India–Africa partnership as a form of South–South cooperation that prioritizes institutions, shared norms, and functional collaboration rather than hegemonic ambitions or alliance-based strategies. Using qualitative analysis and trade data covering the period from 2014 to 2024, the study highlights Africa’s growing strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific, driven by its control over critical sea lanes, increasing geopolitical relevance, and expanding role in maritime governance. The findings indicate Africa’s rising participation in Indo-Pacific trade and security dynamics, alongside China’s substantial economic presence on the continent and India’s comparatively distinctive approach. India’s engagement emphasizes capacity building, maritime security cooperation, education, digital connectivity, and development partnerships. Ongoing anti-piracy operations, defense training programs, and institutional linkages with African coastal states underscore India’s role as both a security provider and a development partner. The study concludes that the India–Africa partnership strengthens the Global South’s collective influence by offering an alternative to hierarchical and dependency-oriented engagement models.

Keywords: India–Africa Partnership, Indo-Pacific, Global South, Liberal Institutionalism, Maritime Security and Cooperation

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a defining geopolitical construct of the twenty-first century, encompassing a vast maritime continuum extending from

the western coasts of the Americas to the eastern shores of Africa. It links the Indian and Pacific Oceans into a single strategic space. The region contains some of the world's busiest sea lanes and critical maritime chokepoints—including the Straits of Malacca, Hormuz, and Bab el-Mandeb—which are central to global trade, energy security, and economic interdependence. As major powers such as the United States, China, India, Japan, and Australia compete to shape regional norms and security architectures, the Indo-Pacific has become a focal point of strategic rivalry, institutional experimentation, and competing visions of regional order. These dynamics are reflected in initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States), and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

Against this backdrop, the study advances two central research questions. First, how do India and African states engage with the Indo-Pacific through trade, maritime security, and institutional cooperation? Second, to what extent does the India–Africa partnership enhance the collective agency of the Global South and contribute to a more multipolar and equitable international order? Addressing these questions is particularly important in light of persistent gaps in the existing literature. Much of the scholarship on the Indo-Pacific remains predominantly Asia-Pacific-centric, and while Africa's geographic proximity to key sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) and maritime chokepoints is frequently acknowledged in policy discourse, it has not been sufficiently theorized as a structural pillar of the Indo-Pacific order (Plessis et al., 2025; Otto & Moeng, 2025; Merwe, 2019). Moreover, a significant portion of the literature continues to interpret Indo-Pacific dynamics primarily through the lens of great-power competition—especially U.S.–China rivalry—thereby marginalizing the role of South–South partnerships (Nagy, 2022; He & Feng, 2023; Loke & Emmers, 2025). As a result, policy-oriented analyses examining how India–Africa cooperation might be institutionalized to promote inclusivity, stability, and rules-based governance in the Indo-Pacific remain limited (Joseph, 2025; Sooklal, 2022).

The India–Africa partnership has assumed increasing relevance within the evolving geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific and the Global South, as Africa's role in the region is now widely recognized as structural rather than peripheral. Africa's eastern and southern coastlines form the western flank of the Indo-Pacific, encompassing critical maritime chokepoints and sea lanes that link the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean. These routes are essential to global trade, energy flows, and naval mobility. This geostrategic positioning has intensified external engagement with the continent, most notably through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Africa's integration into the BRI has been articulated through “win–win” development narratives centered on connectivity and infrastructure, while its relevance within the Maritime Silk Road highlights the strategic importance of ports and logistics hubs for maritime governance and regional power balances

(Carmody et al., 2022; Jian, 2018; Mayer & Zhang, 2020; Sum, 2019). As a result, Africa has increasingly emerged as a contested space where development imperatives intersect with strategic competition.

Africa's growing importance is also evident in its expanding institutional embeddedness within global governance frameworks. Platforms such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) have institutionalized sustained political dialogue and development financing, thereby reinforcing Africa's global agency (Dike & Owusu, 2024). At the same time, persistent maritime security challenges—including piracy, trafficking, illegal fishing, and maritime terrorism—have direct implications for Indo-Pacific stability, positioning Africa as a frontline stakeholder in regional security dynamics.

Against the historical under-recognition of Africa within Indo-Pacific strategic narratives, the India–Africa partnership has acquired growing significance. Anchored in shared colonial experiences and parallel aspirations for strategic autonomy, India and African states have increasingly expanded cooperation across economic, maritime, and diplomatic domains (Davis, 2018; Guyot-Réchart, 2022; Konwer, 2024). India's emphasis on secure sea lanes, energy security, and the maintenance of a rules-based maritime order converges with Africa's geostrategic positioning along critical maritime corridors. This convergence underscores the necessity of Africa's systematic integration for the realization of a balanced and inclusive Indo-Pacific order (Kiran & Saikia, 2025; Joseph, 2025; Hazarika & Hussain, 2025).

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design grounded in secondary sources and recent academic scholarship. It employs content and thematic analysis across four key sub-themes: economic cooperation, maritime security, South–South cooperation, and global governance, drawing on trade data from 2014 to 2024. Comparative insights derived from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Indo-Pacific minilateral arrangements, including the Quad, further contextualize India's role in advancing multipolarity and equitable development. Accordingly, the study conceptualizes the India–Africa partnership not as a peripheral alignment, but as a Global South–driven contribution to shaping an inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific order. Following the introduction, the study first situates the partnership within a liberal institutional framework before examining India's role in the Indo-Pacific and Africa's strategic significance. It then analyzes the India–Africa partnership and its broader implications for the Global South. The conclusion underscores that this partnership represents a robust, South-led model of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, grounded in liberal institutional principles. From a policy perspective, the India–Africa partnership demonstrates how Global South actors can actively shape regional order through institutions, norms, and cooperative practices, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific system.

India–Africa Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: A Liberal Institutional Perspective

The analytical framework of this study operationalizes liberal institutionalism by systematically linking its core theoretical concepts to observable indicators and empirical evidence drawn from India–Africa engagement in the Indo-Pacific. From a liberal institutionalist perspective, institutions function as critical enablers of cooperation by providing structured arenas for repeated interaction, reducing uncertainty, and generating predictable patterns of behavior. The growing density of institutional linkages between India and African partners—reflected in mechanisms such as the India–Africa Forum Summit (IAFS), the India–Africa Defence Dialogue, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)—underscores the central role of institutionalized engagement in sustaining cooperation. Collectively, these platforms form a multilayered governance architecture through which political dialogue, security coordination, and economic collaboration are routinized, reinforcing Keohane’s (1984) argument that institutions can facilitate cooperation even in the absence of hegemonic enforcement.

A key liberal institutionalist mechanism evident in the India–Africa partnership is the reduction of transaction costs through regularized interactions and standardized procedures. Recurring defence-oriented conclaves, such as the Africa–India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME), along with institutionalized naval exercises including MILAN and IBSAMAR VIII, illustrate how repeated engagement lowers coordination costs and enhances operational familiarity. Moreover, information-sharing arrangements and logistics cooperation contribute to reducing uncertainty across maritime and security domains, aligning with Keohane’s (1984) and Lebovic’s (2006) emphasis on institutions as mechanisms for managing complexity and uncertainty within an anarchic international system. These dynamics are particularly salient in the Indo-Pacific context, where maritime security challenges necessitate sustained, institutionalized coordination rather than ad hoc responses.

Economic interdependence represents another foundational pillar of the partnership, reflecting the functionalist logic articulated by Mitrany (1975). Trade data covering the period from 2014 to 2024 indicate a steady expansion and increasing diversification of economic exchanges between India and Africa. These exchanges include Indian exports such as pharmaceuticals, machinery, and cereals, alongside imports of minerals, energy resources, and rare earth elements. This diversification suggests a deepening of economic ties that extend beyond primary commodities, thereby creating shared stakes in stability and sustained cooperation. From a liberal institutionalist perspective, such interdependence

generates incentives for continued engagement and strengthens the demand for institutional arrangements capable of managing increasingly complex economic relationships.

Institutional longevity serves as an important indicator of the partnership's resilience. The continuity of the India–Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) since 2008, sustained Indian naval deployments in the Western Indian Ocean, and long-term education and training programmes demonstrate how repeated interactions institutionalize expectations and embed cooperation within stable frameworks. Martin and Beth's (1998) argument that institutions endure when they deliver tangible benefits is reflected in the persistence and expansion of India–Africa engagement across multiple sectors.

Information sharing and transparency further enhance cooperation by improving maritime domain awareness and reducing misperceptions. Joint exercises, coordinated anti-piracy patrols off the Horn of Africa, and information exchanges through forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) illustrate Keohane's (1984) claim that institutions facilitate cooperation by improving information flows in security-sensitive environments. Trust-building through repeated interaction is also evident in defence and peacekeeping cooperation, including initiatives such as AFINDEX-2023, IBSAMAR VIII, and recurring defence training missions. These engagements foster predictable expectations and reinforce cooperative norms (Keohane, 1984).

Functional cooperation beyond high politics, such as sustained anti-piracy operations since 2008, humanitarian assistance during Cyclone Idai, and telemedicine and tele-education initiatives under the Pan-African e-Network Project (PANEP)—aligns with Mitrany's (1975) functionalist logic, whereby technical cooperation generates spillover effects into broader political collaboration. Norm diffusion and socialization further shape the partnership through shared discourse emphasizing a rules-based maritime order, freedom of navigation, sovereignty, non-alignment, and strategic autonomy. Drawing on the insights of Ikenberry (1998–1999) and Wendt (1999), these shared narratives contribute to identity formation and legitimize cooperative behaviour within the broader Indo-Pacific context. South–South solidarity further distinguishes the India–Africa partnership from hierarchical models of engagement. Development cooperation framed as partnership—illustrated by scholarship programmes for African students, the establishment of the IIT Zanzibar campus, and an emphasis on capacity-building rather than conditional lending—reinforces normative commitments to equity and mutual respect, as noted by Chatterjee (2017) and Kumar (2020).

Finally, liberal institutionalism helps explain how India–Africa cooperation contributes to the emergence of a multipolar order and the provision of collective security. Africa's active participation in institutions such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium

(IONS), alongside coordination with India in broader Global South forums and alignment with Agenda 2063, demonstrates the capacity of Global South actors to shape regional norms. India's emphasis on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), freedom of navigation, and inclusive Indo-Pacific principles constrains unilateral behaviour and enhances legitimacy. Maritime security initiatives—including Indian Navy escort missions and capacity-building efforts for African coast guards—further underscore the treatment of security as a collective good. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that the India–Africa partnership represents an increasingly institutionalized and cooperative architecture consistent with liberal institutionalist expectations in the Indo-Pacific.

India's Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

Economic Interests

India's economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific aligns closely with liberal institutionalist principles, particularly the emphasis on institutions as mechanisms for managing vulnerabilities arising from interdependence. India's reliance on maritime trade routes, energy imports, and access to emerging markets transforms the Indo-Pacific from a purely strategic theatre into an economic domain governed by regimes, where stability depends on institutionalized cooperation rather than unilateral control.

India's dependence on critical maritime chokepoints—the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab-el-Mandeb—creates strong structural incentives for cooperation. Collectively, these chokepoints facilitate a substantial share of global trade and energy flows. The Strait of Malacca accounts for nearly 25% of global trade and approximately one-third of seaborne oil traffic (Ang, 2021). The Strait of Hormuz handled 20.5 million barrels of crude oil per day in 2023 (Reuters, 2023), while the Bab-el-Mandeb carries roughly 9% of global seaborne petroleum trade (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2019). For India, where more than 55% of total trade transits the Malacca Strait and approximately 84% of crude oil imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz, these chokepoints constitute both economic lifelines and strategic vulnerabilities (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017; Bhatti, 2019).

Rather than securitizing these vulnerabilities primarily through militarization, India has largely pursued institutional embedding as a strategy for risk mitigation. With the Indian Ocean accounting for approximately 95% of India's trade by volume and 68% by value, maritime stability functions as a collective good rather than a zero-sum objective (Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, 2023). Consistent with Keohane's (1984) argument that institutions endure when they generate reciprocal benefits, India has invested in bilateral and multilateral economic frameworks designed to reduce transaction costs, enhance transparency, and stabilize expectations. Furthermore, this institutional logic is

evident in India's economic ties with key Indo-Pacific partners, including Vietnam, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, and Australia. India–Vietnam relations, anchored in a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, have witnessed bilateral trade reaching USD 15.76 billion (Embassy of India, 2025a). Singapore's role as a financial and logistical hub has made it India's largest source of foreign direct investment, amounting to USD 15 billion in the 2024–25 fiscal year (TOI Business Desk, 2025). Trade between India and South Korea has reached USD 27 billion under a “Special Strategic Partnership” framework (Press Trust of India, 2023), while India–Japan trade stood at USD 22.85 billion in 2023–24 (Embassy of India, 2025b). Following the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement, India–Australia trade reached USD 24 billion in 2023–24 (Press Information Bureau, 2025). Collectively, these relationships demonstrate that India's economic engagement is not merely transactional but contributes to the socialization of cooperative norms—a core mechanism emphasized by liberal institutionalism.

Critically, however, India's institutional strategy faces important constraints. While institutions can mitigate risk and reduce uncertainty, they do not eliminate underlying asymmetries in economic power, particularly vis-à-vis China. India's approach therefore represents not an alternative to power politics but an attempt to manage competitive dynamics through institutional means, highlighting both the utility and the limits of liberal institutionalism in an era of intensified strategic competition.

Maritime Security

India's maritime security engagement in the Indo-Pacific is anchored in the principles of freedom of navigation and the protection of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), reflecting a liberal institutionalist preference for a rules-based order over unilateral coercion (Scobell, 2018). Rather than seeking maritime dominance, India presents its security posture as a contribution to regional stability grounded in shared norms and economic interdependence.

Freedom of navigation functions as a collective good in the Indo-Pacific, where disruptions arising from territorial disputes and coercive practices generate systemic risks. India's emphasis on predictable maritime regimes reflects the institutionalist insight that stability within interdependent systems depends on commonly accepted rules and procedures rather than the use of force (Scobell, 2018). However, this normative commitment is increasingly tested by rising militarization in contested maritime zones.

Territorial disputes in the South China Sea, along the Sino–Indian border, and in the East China Sea have intensified regional strategic competition. The escalation of Chinese military activity around Taiwan in September 2023—marked by the deployment of 68 People's Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft and 10 People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels—illustrates how territorial contestation directly threatens maritime and aerial stability (Mahadzir, 2023). These

developments underscore the limitations of unilateral security approaches and reinforce India's growing reliance on institutionalized cooperation.

For India, the stakes are particularly high: nearly USD 200 billion of its trade passes through the South China Sea (Saha, 2021). This reliance reinforces India's incentive to support multilateral mechanisms that safeguard freedom of navigation and prevent conflict escalation. From a liberal institutionalist view point, India's maritime posture reflects complex interdependence, where vulnerability encourages cooperation rather than confrontation. This logic also underpins India's engagement with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). While often interpreted through a realist lens as a balancing act against China, India's participation in the Quad also represents an effort to embed maritime security within a framework of shared norms, transparency, and inclusivity (Nga et al., 2025; Ali, 2024). The Quad's avoidance of formal alliance commitments aligns with India's sensitivity to concerns from the Global South about rigid security blocs and the preservation of strategic autonomy.

From a Global South perspective, India's maritime strategy carries normative significance. Through anti-piracy operations, capacity-building initiatives, and information sharing, India positions itself as a provider of collective security rather than a hegemonic enforcer. Simultaneously, India's emphasis on sovereignty and the rule of law reflects its own security concerns, particularly in light of Chinese assertiveness along the Line of Actual Control in East Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. This duality illustrates the tension between normative commitments and strategic imperatives within India's institutionalist approach.

Strategic Security and Defence Cooperation

India's strategic security and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific reflects a liberal institutionalist approach that prioritizes institutionalized partnerships over formal alliances. In a contested maritime environment, India seeks to reduce uncertainty by embedding its security interests within multilateral, minilateral, and bilateral frameworks that emphasize transparency and interoperability.

At the minilateral level, the Quad functions as a normative security institution rather than a traditional alliance, promoting a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific grounded in international law (The White House, 2022). Its evolution—from humanitarian coordination following the 2004 tsunami to a structured strategic dialogue—supports Keohane's argument that repeated cooperation fosters durable regimes (Lee & Lee, 2016; Harrison, 2022). Nonetheless, India's engagement remains cautious, reflecting an effort to balance deterrence with strategic autonomy. Regionally, India's security engagement is anchored in institution-building across the Indian Ocean through IORA, the Colombo Security Conclave, and the SAGAR doctrine (Allen, 1999; Roy, 2022). SAGAR operationalizes liberal institutionalist principles by framing maritime

security as a collective good connected to development, disaster response, and international law. This approach contrasts with heavily militarized strategies but relies on sustained political commitment and capacity among partner states.

India's articulation of the Indo-Pacific at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue further institutionalized this vision, explicitly rejecting exclusionary security architectures and reaffirming sovereignty and inclusivity (Kaura, 2020). The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), launched in 2019, institutionalizes cooperation across functional pillars, reflecting an issue-linkage strategy central to liberal institutionalism (Muralidharan, 2021).

Bilateral defense partnerships and joint maritime exercises with the United States, Australia, Japan, and France further demonstrate how institutionalized agreements enhance interoperability without forming formal alliances. Mechanisms such as 2+2 dialogues and agreements—including the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, General Security of Military Information Agreement, and Mutual Logistics Support Agreement—facilitate logistical access and intelligence sharing, reducing misperceptions and enhancing predictability (Upadhyay, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2020; Pant, 2022; Nisar, 2023; Khurshid, 2024). From an institutionalist perspective, these partnerships reduce transaction costs and strengthen collective security without imposing binding commitments.

From a Global South perspective, India's defense strategy emphasizes capacity-building and inclusivity, particularly through outreach to African littoral states under the SAGAR initiative (Abhinandan, 2019). By integrating Africa into Indo-Pacific security frameworks, India expands the region's strategic architecture and amplifies Global South agency in maritime governance. Accordingly, India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific reflects a liberal institutionalist security order shaped by the sensibilities of the Global South. While not immune to power politics, India's preference for institutions, norms, and inclusive partnerships demonstrates how cooperation can coexist with competition, contributing to a resilient and multipolar Indo-Pacific order.

Africa's Role in the Indo-Pacific

Africa's Geopolitical Space in the Indo-Pacific

Africa, the world's second-largest continent, spanning approximately 30.3 million km² (Sayre, 1999), occupies a pivotal yet frequently under-recognized position within the Indo-Pacific. Bordered by the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans and comprising thirty-eight coastal and island states, Africa's maritime domain holds substantial strategic and developmental potential as the western maritime anchor of the Indo-Pacific. Its eastern and southern coastlines intersect with critical Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) that link the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and beyond, rendering African maritime stability

essential to the effective functioning of the Indo-Pacific order. However, the Indo-Pacific is not merely a geographic construct; it is also a discursive framework shaped by great-power competition and competing strategic narratives that influence how actors define partnerships and alignments (Otto & Moeng, 2025). Within these narratives, Africa is often positioned as a peripheral extension of the Indo-Pacific **instead of** an autonomous strategic actor, thereby obscuring its agency and strategic interests. Africa's geopolitical significance has intensified alongside the expansion of great-power competition along its maritime periphery. China's growing naval presence and port infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative, coupled with increased engagement by India, the United States, and France, have transformed regions such as the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean into contested strategic spaces (Qobo & Mzyece, 2023). The Maritime Silk Road Initiative exemplifies this shift. China's overseas military base in Djibouti, embedded within a wider network of dual-use ports and logistics hubs, carries profound implications for maritime governance and regional power balances (Blanchard, 2020). These developments highlight Africa's emergence as a frontline arena in which Indo-Pacific rivalries are increasingly unfolding.

Historically, African security frameworks have prioritized land-based threats, resulting in the under-governance of maritime domains despite extensive coastlines and heavy reliance on maritime trade (Bueger, 2013). Episodes of Somali piracy and piracy in the Gulf of Guinea exposed these vulnerabilities and catalyzed greater attention to maritime security cooperation (Bueger, 2013). Contemporary security challenges further reinforce Africa's strategic relevance. Armed non-state actors, cross-border terrorism, ungoverned maritime spaces, and protracted low-intensity conflicts intersect with financial vulnerability, debt dependence, and the militarization of the Western Indian Ocean, collectively complicating Africa's security environment (Nessa & Kleczkowska, 2024; Cannon, 2024).

Despite these dynamics, Africa lacks a cohesive Indo-Pacific strategy due to internal capacity constraints and fragmented regional priorities. Nevertheless, its growing importance has prompted selective inclusion in external Indo-Pacific visions, such as Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and the India–Japan Asia–Africa Economic Growth Corridor. Understanding Africa's perspective is therefore essential. While the African Union is yet to articulate an explicit Indo-Pacific framework, the continent occupies a critical position at the intersection of the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. By aligning Indo-Pacific engagement with Agenda 2063, the African Union can advance African interests through strengthened maritime security governance, economic development, and deeper integration into global governance structures, thereby reinforcing Africa's agency within an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific order.

Africa’s Geo-economic Role in the Indo-Pacific

Africa is assuming an increasingly significant geo-economic role in the Indo-Pacific as both a conduit and an active participant in global trade, energy flows, and transregional connectivity. Its maritime routes facilitate the movement of energy resources, minerals, and manufactured goods linking Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas, rendering stability in African waters critical to Indo-Pacific economies. Africa’s geo-economic integration is most evident in infrastructure and connectivity initiatives, particularly China’s Maritime Silk Road under the Belt and Road Initiative. Between 2013 and 2023, Chinese firms signed contracts exceeding USD 700 billion across Africa, transforming ports, railways, and logistics corridors into key nodes within cross-regional supply chains (Agence France-Presse, 2024). While these investments have enhanced connectivity and economic growth, they have also generated concerns regarding debt sustainability, strategic influence, and long-term economic dependence. Comparative trade data further indicate that China has emerged as Africa’s largest trading partner.

Table 1: US–Africa trade vs. China-Africa trade (2002 to 2024) – In US\$ Billion.

Yea rs	China’s Export s to Africa	China’s Imports from Africa	China	US Exports to Africa	US Imports from Africa	U.S.
200 2	7	5	12	11	10	21
200 3	10	7	18	11	16	26
200 4	14	14	27	13	23	37
200 5	19	19	38	15	34	49
200 6	27	27	53	19	46	65
200 7	37	34	71	24	54	77
200 8	51	51	102	28	72	101
200 9	48	40	88	24	48	73

2010	60	60	120	28	70	98
2011	73	74	147	33	95	128
2012	85	79	164	33	97	130
2013	93	81	174	35	96	131
2014	106	80	186	38	92	130
2015	156	48	203	27	26	53
2016	92	41	133	22	28	49
2017	94	60	155	22	35	57
2018	105	80	185	26	37	63
2019	113	79	192	27	31	58
2020	114	62	176	22	24	46
2021	146	86	232	27	38	65
2022	164	97	261	31	43	74
2023	172	90	262	29	40	69
2024	179	99	277	32	40	73

Source: China Africa Research Initiative, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. <https://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade>

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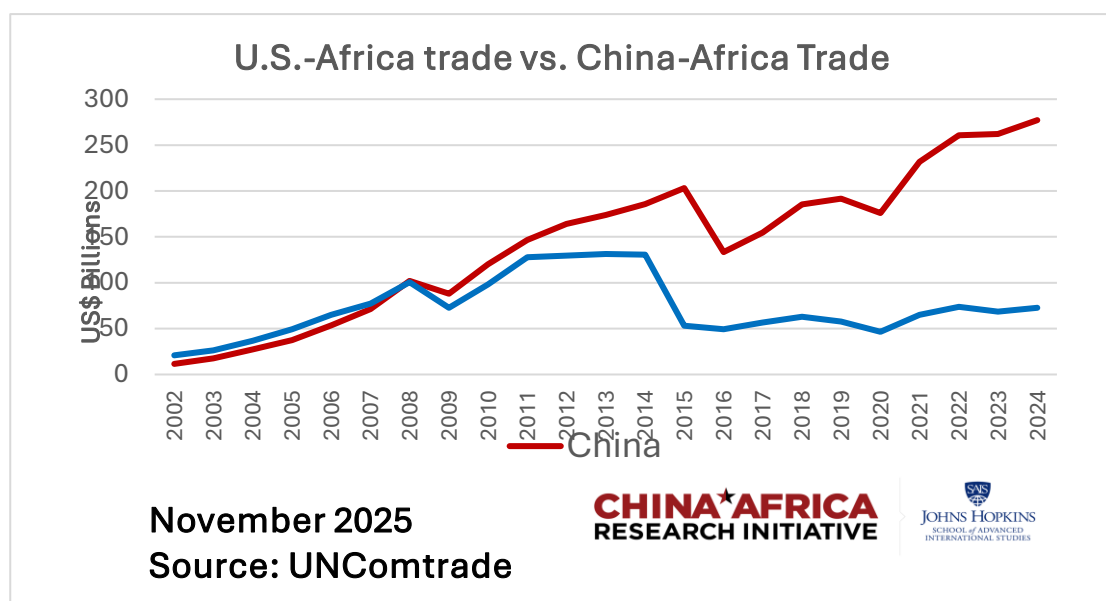
Table 1 presents a longitudinal comparison of merchandise trade flows between Africa and its two most significant external economic partners—China and the United States—over the period from 2002 to 2024, measured in billions of U.S. dollars.

The data indicate a clear structural divergence in Africa's trade relationships with China and the United States. Although both partners experienced trade expansion in the early 2000s, China–Africa trade grew at a markedly faster pace, increasing from US\$12 billion in 2002 to US\$277 billion

in 2024—an expansion of more than 2,200 percent. In contrast, U.S.–Africa trade grew more modestly, rising from US\$21 billion in 2002 to US\$73 billion in 2024, reflecting a slower and more volatile trajectory.

By 2009, China had overtaken the United States as Africa’s largest trading partner, and the gap has since widened substantially. By 2024, China–Africa trade was nearly four times larger than U.S.–Africa trade, underscoring a fundamental realignment in Africa’s external economic orientation.

Figure 1: US–Africa trade vs. China–Africa trade (2002 to 2024) – In US\$ Billion.



From a strategic point of view, trade has emerged as a central instrument of geopolitical influence in Africa. China’s expanding trade footprint enhances its economic leverage, supply-chain integration, and political influence, whereas the United States’ comparatively limited trade engagement constrains its capacity to shape African development trajectories and strategic alignments. Within the broader Indo-Pacific and global geoeconomic context, Africa’s deepening economic entanglement with China strengthens Beijing’s ability to project influence across critical maritime corridors, resource supply chains, and Global South coalitions, while the United States faces increasing challenges in sustaining economic primacy on the continent. As Forough (2019) observes, China’s Belt and Road Initiative represents an intervention characterized by distinct “Chinese characteristics stressing the geoeconomic dimensions of connectivity-driven development. Collectively, these trends underscore Africa’s transformation from

a peripheral trading partner into an increasingly integrated and strategically significant actor within global trade networks.

Africa as a Global South Actor in the Indo-Pacific

Africa's engagement with the Indo-Pacific is closely linked to its identity as a Global South actor seeking greater influence in global governance. African states increasingly perceive the Indo-Pacific not merely as a theatre of external power projection, but as a space in which to advance sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and equitable development. This perspective is reflected in continental and regional platforms such as the African Union's Agenda 2063, as well as Africa's participation in institutions including the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and the Indian Ocean Commission. Through these forums, African actors aim to influence regional norms, rules, and institutional arrangements rather than remain passive recipients of externally driven agendas.

Agenda 2063 constitutes the ideological and strategic foundation of Africa's external engagement. Rooted in Pan-Africanism and Nkrumahism, it reflects Kwame Nkrumah's conviction that continental unity and supranational governance are essential to Africa's political and economic emancipation (Fagbayibo, 2018). Consistent with Nkrumah's vision, Agenda 2063 prioritizes integration over fragmentation as the basis for enhancing Africa's global relevance, independence, and self-reliance. Nwozor et al. (2021) argue that the agenda embodies the principle of "African solutions to African problems," marking a departure from externally imposed development models. Moreover, its formulation through extensive continental consultations reinforces African ownership, legitimacy, and broad societal support.

Agenda 2063's seven interconnected aspirations—encompassing political unity, economic transformation, democratic governance, peace and security, cultural identity, people-centred development, and Africa's role in global affairs—articulate a long-term vision of structural transformation rather than isolated sectoral reform (Anthony, 2025). As Tella (2018) observes, the agenda also represents Africa's first comprehensive attempt to embed soft power within a continental development framework. Unlike earlier initiatives, such as the Lagos Plan of Action and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), Agenda 2063 explicitly recognizes culture, governance, peace, and shared values as strategic assets that shape Africa's global image and international influence.

As a Global South actor, Africa has pursued a strategy of selective engagement and diplomatic hedging in the Indo-Pacific, avoiding exclusive alignment amid intensifying great-power rivalry. This approach allows African states to secure economic, technological, and security benefits while maintaining strategic autonomy. Engagement with India, in particular, aligns with the principles of South–South cooperation, emphasizing capacity building, local

ownership, and non-hierarchical partnerships as alternatives to dependency-oriented development models.

Africa's engagement in the Indo-Pacific also reinforces the collective agency of the Global South. Contemporary scholarship conceptualizes the Global South not merely as a geographic category but as a normative and political project. Mungwini (2024) characterizes it as a "constellation of political, ontological, and epistemological aspirations," while Escobar (2020) frames it as a transformative space that challenges colonial and epistemic hierarchies. Drawing on indigenous philosophies such as *Ubuntu*, African thought foregrounds relationality, community, and shared humanity as alternative foundations for global order (Ramose, 1999; Mungwini, 2024). Through its Indo-Pacific engagements, Africa thus emerges not only as a strategic actor but also as a norm entrepreneur advancing pluralistic and decolonised visions of global governance.

The Partnership and Significance to the Global South

Geopolitical dynamics

The geopolitical balance in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the western Indian Ocean, is increasingly significant. China's growing influence, notably through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has begun to reshape the region's political and economic landscape. This shift has amplified India's strategic interests, as it seeks to engage African countries by offering an alternative partnership model. China's BRI has often been associated with what scholars describe as debt-trap diplomacy (Himmer & Rod, 2022; Yang, 2025), affecting countries such as Angola, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Zambia. In response, India, together with strategic partners such as the United States, France, and Japan, is positioned to offer a more transparent and accountable framework for cooperation in Africa. Such an approach seeks to counter China's growing influence while reinforcing India's commitment to sustainable development in the region. Within this broader geostrategic context, the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) holds particular significance in the Indo-Pacific. Beyond its economic objectives, the AAGC symbolizes the historical ties between India and African countries and represents a distinctive expression of the deepening India–Japan strategic partnership and their evolving bilateral relations.

Economic development

India has positioned itself as a partner in sustainable development, with an emphasis on trade, investment, and technology transfer. This positioning is reflected in Table X, which presents detailed trade values (in millions of U.S. dollars) between India and Africa from 2014 to 2024.

Table 2 India – Africa Export and Import from 2014 to 2024 – Value in US\$ Million

India's Export to Africa - Value in US\$ Million		India's Imports from Africa – Value in US\$ Million		Trade deficit
Years	Africa	Years	Africa	
2014 – 15	310,338.48	2014 – 15	448,033.41	-1,37,694.93
2015 – 16	262,291.09	2015 – 16	381,007.76	-1,18,716.67
2016 – 17	275,852.43	2016 – 17	384,357.03	-1,08,504.6
2017 – 18	303,526.16	2017 – 18	465,580.99	-1,62,054.83
2018 – 19	330,078.09	2018 – 19	514,078.42	-1,84,000.33
2019 – 20	313,361.04	2019 – 20	474,709.28	-1,61,348.24
2020 – 21	291,808.48	2020 – 21	394,435.88	-1,02,627.4
2021 – 22	422,004.40	2021 – 22	613,052.05	-1,91,047.65
2022 – 23	451,070.00	2022 – 23	715,968.90	-2,64,898.9
2023 – 24	437,072.03	2023 – 24	678,214.77	-2,41,142.74

1 Himmer and Rod (2022) define *debt-trap diplomacy* as a strategy in which China deliberately extends excessive loans to low-income or financially vulnerable states, anticipating that repayment difficulties will enable the extraction of strategic concessions. They further argue that debt-trap diplomacy involves situations in which borrowing states are compelled to relinquish strategic assets—such as ports, infrastructure, land, or utilities—when they are unable to service their debt, often through debt-for-equity swaps. Similarly, Yang (2025), in his analysis of China's rhetorical responses to the debt-trap diplomacy narrative, defines the concept as the claim that China intentionally provides large-scale loans to developing countries in order to foster economic dependence, thereby increasing its political leverage and strategic influence. More broadly, debt-trap diplomacy is commonly understood as a practice in which BRI-related lending leads recipient countries into unsustainable debt levels, exacerbating debt-to-GDP ratios and triggering balance-of-payments crises.

Source: Government of India, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Department of Commerce – 2014 – 2024.
<https://tradedstat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/ergncom.asp>

The trade data on India's exports to Africa from 2014 to 2024 illustrate notable trends and fluctuations, highlighting the evolving economic relationship between the two regions. Overall, export values declined from USD 310 million in 2014–15 to USD 262 million in 2015–16, followed by a recovery to USD 330 million by 2018–19. Exports then dipped during the COVID-19 period to USD 291 million before rising to USD 451 million in 2022–23, indicating resilience in bilateral trade. Similarly, the trade data on India's imports from Africa over the same period reveal important trends underscoring Africa's growing significance as a key trading partner. Import values declined from USD 448

million in 2014–15 to USD 381 million in 2015–16, before increasing to USD 514 million in 2018–19. A pandemic-related decline to USD 394 million was followed by a sharp rise to USD 716 million in 2022–23, reflecting a strong post-pandemic recovery.

Collectively, the trade data from 2014 to 2024 show that India has consistently recorded a trade deficit with Africa, reflecting its import dependence while also pointing to opportunities for deeper economic engagement, investment, and strategic cooperation aligned with India's Indo-Pacific objectives. India's exports to Africa include iron and steel, cereals, cotton, electrical machinery, pharmaceuticals, organic chemicals, plastics, sugar, and vehicles, while imports largely comprise mineral fuels, ores, rare earth metals, inorganic chemicals, edible fruits and nuts, copper, and pearls (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2024). This complementary trade structure suggests increasing diversification and a strengthening India–Africa strategic economic partnership.

South-South Cooperation

South–South cooperation emphasizes collaboration among developing countries through trade, knowledge sharing, and technical assistance, and India–Africa relations strongly reflect this model. Their partnership extends beyond commerce to include capacity building and human resource development. A flagship initiative is the Pan African e-Network Project (PANEP), launched in 2009, which has expanded tele-education and telemedicine across 47 African countries and established IT centers in South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Lesotho, Ghana, Namibia, and Tanzania, as well as geo-informatics centers in Madagascar and Niger to support rural development (Sachdev, 2020; Ministry of External Affairs, 2013). Under the Partnership for Skills in Applied Sciences, Engineering, and Technology initiative, India and the World Bank facilitated a five-day knowledge exchange for delegates from Rwanda, Ethiopia, Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and Tanzania, strengthening skills in applied sciences and technology (World Bank Group, 2017).

Educational cooperation was further reinforced at the Third India–Africa Forum Summit in 2015, where India pledged 50,000 scholarships for African students (United Nations, 2019). Currently, more than 25,000 African students study at Indian universities (Cheru & Obi, 2010; Pant & Bhattacharya, 2023). In 2023, India and Tanzania signed a memorandum of understanding to establish the first overseas IIT campus in Zanzibar, underscoring India's commitment to innovation, education, and sustainable development in Africa (Pant & Bhattacharya, 2023). This trajectory aligns with India's broader narrative in the Global South as a “Vishwaguru” and “Vishwamitra” (Konwer, 2024).

Security collaborations

Security collaboration has emerged as a key pillar of India–Africa relations, with 2023 marking a milestone through the first-ever India–Africa Army Chiefs Conclave, held on 28 March 2023, highlighting India’s growing defence engagement and industrial outreach to Africa (Press Information Bureau, 2023b). India’s most significant contribution lies in training and capacity building. For example, it has supported Nigeria in establishing defence academies by providing instructors and training materials (Seth, 2008). Through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, India engages in military cooperation with nearly one-third of Africa’s 54 countries, offering training in security and strategic studies, defence management, engineering, logistics, artillery, electronics, anti-marine warfare, and quality assurance (Cheru & Obi, 2010; Dutta, 2008; Dubey, 2011). Training also extends to African Coast Guard officers, with plans to expand defence training teams across the continent (Singh, 2022).

Maritime cooperation has gained salient importance through India’s Joint Vision with Kenya under the BAHARI initiative (meaning “ocean” in Swahili), which seeks to strengthen maritime security in the western Indian Ocean amid evolving Indo-Pacific geopolitics (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023a). Complementing these efforts, the India–Africa Defence Dialogue provides a vital institutional platform to deepen strategic partnerships, defence industrial collaboration, maritime security cooperation, and soft power diplomacy, thereby reinforcing India–Africa security ties within the broader Indo-Pacific framework.

Terrorism & Piracy

India and African nations have strengthened cooperation to counter terrorism and maritime piracy in the Indian Ocean, a region vital for global trade and security. In 2021, India and Nigeria held their first Strategic and Counter-Terrorism Dialogue, jointly reaffirming that terrorism is unjustifiable in any form (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021). India’s defence engagement also includes support for the establishment of military academies in Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Tanzania, alongside the deployment of training teams to Botswana, Namibia, Uganda, Lesotho, Zambia, Mauritius, the Seychelles, and Tanzania (Dutt, 1980; TNN, 2019). India has further contributed through humanitarian assistance, notably during Cyclone Idai in Mozambique in 2019 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019).

Multilateral security cooperation was highlighted by AFINDEX-2023, conducted in Pune, which brought together troops from 25 African countries and Indian regiments to train for peacekeeping and humanitarian mine action under UN mandates (Press Information Bureau, 2023c). Maritime security remains central to India–Africa collaboration. Since 2008, the Indian Navy has conducted sustained anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa, escorting more than 3,440

vessels and protecting approximately 25,000 crew members (Press Information Bureau, 2023a). India also strengthens maritime ties through joint naval exercises such as IBSAMAR VIII with Brazil and South Africa, as well as bilateral exercises with the Kenyan Navy, complemented by goodwill naval visits to several African states, thereby strengthening cooperative maritime governance in the Indo-Pacific (Press Information Bureau, 2024; Asian News International, 2024; Singh, 2023).

Conclusion

This study examines the India–Africa partnership in the Indo-Pacific, accentuating its role as a Global South response to shifting geopolitical, economic, and security dynamics. Drawing on a liberal institutionalist perspective and analyzing trade data, maritime security initiatives, and institutional cooperation, the study demonstrates that India–Africa relations are not merely peripheral or reactive; rather, they are emerging as a significant force in moulding the evolving Indo-Pacific order.

The study contributes to Indo-Pacific scholarship by extending liberal institutionalism beyond its traditional focus on the Global North and applying it to South–South cooperation. It illustrates that India–Africa relations exemplify how institutions, norms, and functional cooperation can mitigate power asymmetries without relying primarily on hegemonic enforcement or formal alliances. By conceptualizing Africa as a key structural actor rather than merely a geographic extension, the research challenges Asia-centric Indo-Pacific models and enriches theoretical debates on the Global South, including issues of multipolarity, norm entrepreneurship, and institutional balancing. The findings suggest that liberal institutionalism remains a robust analytical framework for understanding how developing countries pursue strategic autonomy within an anarchic international system.

Despite increasing strategic importance, the India–Africa partnership faces several challenges, including structural and operational issues. Economically, the relationship is asymmetrical: India consistently runs a trade deficit with Africa, indicating ongoing import reliance and limited Indian manufacturing presence compared to China’s extensive trade and infrastructure network. While India’s development aid and investments are appealing in principle, their scale remains modest and progress slow, reducing competitiveness against large, finance-driven initiatives like China’s BRI. Institutionally, initiatives like the India–Africa Forum Summit and Defence Dialogue exist, but follow-up and project execution are often inconsistent due to bureaucratic delays and resource shortages. From Africa’s perspective, engagement with India can be fragmented due to internal coordination issues and the absence of a cohesive Indo-Pacific strategy. In security, India’s focus on capacity-building and inclusivity is valuable but lacks the necessary depth and

resources to effectively counter maritime and terrorism threats. These challenges collectively limit the partnership's potential for transformation.

Despite its growing strategic importance, the India–Africa partnership faces several challenges, including structural and operational constraints. Economically, the relationship remains asymmetrical: India consistently runs a trade deficit with Africa, reflecting ongoing import dependence and a limited Indian manufacturing presence compared with China's extensive trade and infrastructure network. Although India's development aid and investments are attractive in principle, their scale remains modest, and progress is slow, reducing competitiveness against large, finance-driven initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Institutionally, initiatives like the India–Africa Forum Summit and the Defence Dialogue exist; however, follow-up and project implementation are often inconsistent due to bureaucratic delays and resource limitations. From Africa's perspective, engagement with India can be fragmented because of internal coordination challenges and the absence of a cohesive Indo-Pacific strategy. In terms of security, India's focus on capacity building and inclusivity is valuable but lacks the depth and resources necessary to effectively address maritime and terrorism threats. Collectively, these challenges constrain the partnership's potential for transformational effect.

Empirically, this study highlights Africa's centrality to Indo-Pacific maritime security and geoeconomics, particularly through its control of critical Sea Lanes of Communication, including the Bab el-Mandeb and the Mozambique Channel. Trade data indicate Africa's deepening economic integration with major powers—most notably China—while India's engagement reflects a complementary, capacity-building model grounded in South–South cooperation. India's sustained maritime security operations, defense training initiatives, educational partnerships, and digital connectivity projects underscore its role as both a net security provider and a development partner. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that Africa is no longer a passive arena of competition but an active stakeholder shaping Indo-Pacific stability and advancing the agency of the Global South.

From a policy standpoint, the India–Africa partnership offers a credible alternative to traditional, hierarchical, and dependency-driven engagement models. For India, strengthening institutional ties with African littoral states enhances maritime security, supply-chain resilience, and diplomatic influence across the western Indo-Pacific region. For African nations, cooperation with India facilitates strategic diversification, capacity building, and alignment with Agenda 2063 priorities, while preserving strategic autonomy amid great-power competition. Overall, the partnership underscores the importance of incorporating Africa into Indo-Pacific strategies—at both national and multilateral levels—as a co-shaper of the regional order. Policymakers should prioritize building inclusive institutional frameworks, maritime capabilities, and

development-focused security cooperation to foster a stable, equitable, and rules-based Indo-Pacific that advances the interests of the Global South.

In this context, the India–Africa partnership demonstrates how Global South actors can collectively steer the regional order through institutions, norms, and functional cooperation. Rather than replicating great-power rivalry, it points toward a more inclusive Indo-Pacific architecture grounded in shared development, maritime security, and strategic autonomy.

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