

OPINION

India risks 'losing' Africa to China

After Beijing raced ahead on the continent, New Delhi must boost ties to catch up

Raj Kumar Sharma September 05, 2018 12:00 JST



Chinese President Xi Jinping, left, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi attend the BRICS summit meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, in July. © Reuters

India and China have competed for influence in Africa for decades. But in the last 10 years, New Delhi has been left far behind by Beijing's dramatic push, spearheaded by cheap loans, huge infrastructure projects and widespread investments in natural resources.

China's commitment was highlighted by the Sept. 3-4 Africa summit in Beijing attended by 53 African states, at which president Xi Jinping pledged \$60 billion in economic aid to the continent, on top of the \$60 billion he said had been disbursed since 2015.

India is responding to Beijing's challenge. But it needs to do much more. It should capitalize on its long-standing assets in the continent, notably a big diaspora, diverse business ties and (in many countries) a common use of English. It must also react to an emerging Chinese naval presence with security-linked initiatives of its own, such

as military training. And it needs to work closely with potential allies, including Japan, the U.K., France and the U.S.

Since the two Asian giants have similar interests in Africa -- energy, economic cooperation and maritime security, New Delhi's traditional soft-power approach may no longer suffice to safeguard its interests, especially after Beijing dropped a long-standing policy of zero military engagement and opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017.

Djibouti is unlikely to be China's last military base in Africa. China is the continent's largest aid provider and biggest creditor, holding 14% of African sovereign debt. There is a real chance that when some of the African countries are unable to pay back loans, Beijing will seek control of strategic assets under its "debt-trap" diplomacy. With 10 million Chinese workers now on the continent, their protection is a growing concern for Beijing, especially after incidents in which such employees were injured or and even killed in clashes.

The growing presence of China's nuclear submarines in the Indian Ocean worries India. China has maintained that its submarines have been deployed for anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia, but this claim is surprising in Indian eyes since deploying submarines to tackle piracy is unusual.

Meanwhile, India has repeatedly lost out to China on economic projects, especially in the crucial energy sector. In 2006, for example, ONGC, the Indian public-sector oil group, unsuccessfully bid for an oil block in Angola which went to a Chinese-led consortium. Total Indian investment in Africa is around \$40 billion, far less than China's figure of more than \$100 billion, including schemes under the global Belt and Road Initiative.

China claims its aid for Africa is "free of political conditions" unlike that provided by most Western countries. This supposedly unconditional respect for sovereignty is often referred to as the "Beijing Consensus." But in fact, China does impose conditions on African states, notably adherence to the One China policy, under which other countries are to abandon official ties with Taiwan.

India, on the other hand, does not impose political conditions on Africa, to which it has promised \$10 billion between 2015 and 2020. While China has focused on heavy infrastructure investments, India concentrates on building human resource and administrative capacity with schemes such as pan-Africa e-network and Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC). It advances a New Delhi Consensus, which focuses on capacity building and local job creation. India believes that unlike China it strives for more balanced relations with African capitals and for "win-win" cooperation.

This level of respect is not without self-interest. India needs support from the 54 African countries in its decades-old bid to secure a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council.

India needs to do much more to counter Chinese influence on the continent, even given its limited resources. First, it should encourage its companies to invest more in Africa by expanding value-added processing plants to reduce dependence on imports of finished goods, boost employment and promote a stronger business culture. China's investments are top-heavy -- relying mainly on government-to-government links. India can do more to develop bottom-up nongovernmental links, not least through its 3 million strong diaspora.

This is India's underused "heritage resource." These people are integrated into African societies and can be a link between India and Africa. Chinese workers in Africa, working largely segregated lives, cannot do this.

India must widen its political outreach. The recent decision to open 18 new African embassies is welcome; it takes the total to 47, not far short of China's 52. The India Africa Forum Summit, the pre-eminent bilateral gathering, is too focused on development and should be expanded to include political and security dialogue.

The most significant actions will be in security, where New Delhi needs both to expand its own presence and to boost cooperation with partners. India is already, since 2016, engaging with the U.S. to jointly train troops from the African countries for UN peacekeeping operations.

Meanwhile, India and France have signed a strategic pact in March 2018 to use each other's military facilities including opening of naval bases for warships. This accord gives India access to French military bases in the Western Indian Ocean, which gives access to the African coast.

Together with Japan, India must do more to respond to China's BRI infrastructure push. The two countries should put more resources into the Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), an economic cooperation program announced last year for linking eastern and southern Africa with East Asia.

India and Japan should, for example, establish well-equipped hospitals in Africa under the AAGC to reverse the medical tourism as thousands of African patients yearly visit India for cheap treatment.

Not surprisingly, China has tried to persuade India to go slow on the AAGC and merge its projects into schemes overseen by the BRICS (the loose association of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), in a move to keep Japan out.

India should also explore increasing cooperation with European states, including France, Germany and the U.K., which have long histories of working in Africa. Education, training and measures to counter climate change, reduce poverty and boost agriculture are all potentially fruitful fields.

Several east and southern African countries are members of the British Commonwealth, a good forum for the U.K., India and African states to develop ties, especially when the U.K. seeks to revive the Commonwealth after Brexit.

Finally, India can exploit the recent backlash in some African states against China, with protests against Beijing's economic dominance, ties with unpopular rulers and the sometimes-poor working conditions for Africans on Chinese projects.

Many Africans see India as a kindred spirit; a country that faces similar problems, such as the legacy of colonial rule, which it has overcome through methods which Africans can emulate. New Delhi needs to put stronger bottom-up foundations under its relationship with Africa.



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