



Strategic relations of China and India with Sub-Saharan Africa: Diversity in objective, manners and outcomes

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Abstract

India and China, two of the world's most populous countries, have rapidly transformed from being emerging nations to key players in international relations, becoming a major point of debate. Both nations are ambitious to capture the growing opportunities in Africa, cashing in on the abundance of considerable natural resources and the youth population (Goldstein, 2006). However, China, as always famous for its dominating and aggressive nature, has become a difficult country to analyse. Pushing both hard and soft powers to accomplish its national interests, China aims to keep ahead of other countries by creating a coalition against them (Dams, 2021). The nation has shown considerable understanding of the current scenario in international politics and has the relevant preparations, measurable in its visionary plan to acquire political and economic gains all over the world, especially in Africa (Roland, 2021). This explains why China has emerged as a major arms exporter to SSA (Sub-Saharan Africa). In contrast, India's strategy has been to move forward positively, considering moral aspects and making changes in its foreign policy according to the national requirements. The proposed study will not generate any episode of the "Dragon-elephant" cliché or China-India power politics in SSA (Cheru, 2010). It will highlight the differences in the methods adopted by both countries, their implementation, and the impact they have created on the lives and future of common Africans. The proposed research will be a theoretical understanding focused on the Sub-Saharan Region of African countries and the sectors of the African continent in which India, as well as China, are investing (CII, 2024). The data will be collected from both sources: primary (official documents & official sites) and secondary (books, articles, newspapers). This comparison will be described based on the recent data available from different sources, and the focus sector will be the following areas: exports from Africa to China and India, African imports from both of the countries (China and India), especially arms supply, competition in third markets, and impacts on FDI.

Keywords: Arms, China, contribution, India, investment, welfare

Introduction

Africa becomes a core of attraction to other countries because of its natural resources. Almost 30 percent of the world's minerals, 8 percent of the natural gas, and 12 percent of the oil reserves are in Africa. Africa is also rich in

cobalt, diamonds, platinum, uranium, and 10 percent of the planet's internal renewable freshwater source (ODI Global, 2024). The following table 1 describes Africa's share of reserves in the year 2024 ^[2].

The majority of the African population lives in SSA, and

Table 1: Africa's Share of Reserves (2024) ^[2]

| Resource | Example of Use | African's Share of Reserves (%) |
|-----------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Platinum | Catalysts for exhaust gas purification | 92.00 |
| cobalt | Batteries | 56.00 |
| manganese | Batteries, special steel | 54 |
| Chromium | Special steel | 43.9 |
| Titanium | Jet engines, power generation turbines | 41 |
| Zirconium | Catalysts for exhaust gas purification | 10 |
| Bauxite | Aluminum, abrasives | 32 |
| Copper | Electric wires, electronic substrates | 11 |
| Gold | Jewellery, electronic devices | 31 |

Source: Kumagai, 2024. India aims to deepen economic ties with Africa.

Source: Prepared by JRI based on USGS, "Mineral Commodity Summaries 2024"

depends on forests and woodlands for their livelihoods. SSA is a diverse region of 47 states. China and India are considered the world's two biggest economies, with both ramping up investments in SSA (Lindsey, 2022). Demand for energy and raw materials puts the SSA region in the front and central in China's industrial policy and foreign direct investment (FDI) strategies. Between 2006 and 2020, a total of 601 Chinese investments and construction contracts, valued at over \$303 billion, were signed in SSA

(Cheraghloou, 2023). Top destinations for Chinese investment in construction include Nigeria, Ethiopia, Angola, Kenya, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which collectively make up over 45 percent of total Chinese investment and construction in the SSA region. In the SSA region, four sectors attract 87 percent of China's investment and construction in the region: energy (34 percent), transport (29 percent), metals (13 percent), and real estate (11 percent). During the 2016-2020 period, China

was the 2nd biggest arms supplier to SSA (Cheraghlou, 2023). The following table 2 will explain the rank of the

countries in the SSA and their contributions in imports and exports.

Table 2: Top Five Export Countries in 2022

| No | Name of the country | Value in US \$ (Million) | Percentage of the total exports |
|----|---------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. | China | 58.477 | 14.75 |
| 2. | India | 28.406 | 7.17 |
| 3. | United States | 20.786 | 5.24 |
| 4. | Netherlands | 20.549 | 5.18 |
| 5. | Switzerland | 14.952 | 3.77 |

Source: Word Integrated Trade Solution, 2022.

The above table (2) describes the top five countries and their contribution to the Sub-Saharan African countries in the form of exports. SSA exports their products to the above-mentioned countries: China, at the top in exports trade at 58.477 US million USD, followed by India (28.406 million USD), and the United States (20.786 million USD). The Netherlands is fourth at 20.549 million USD, while Switzerland, at 14.952 million USD, claims the fifth spot. The following table (3) depicts the top five countries that

are major importers from Sub-Saharan Africa during the year 2022. We have China at the top in exports as well as imports from Sub-Saharan Africa, with a value of 76.822 million USD and an 18.22 percent partner share. India comes second with 31.971 million USD (partner share of 7.58). South Africa is third with a value of 26.176 million USD, followed by the United Arab Emirates with 23.430 million USD and a 5.56 partner share, and the United States with 20.283 million USD and a partner share of 4.81.

Table 3: Top Five Import Countries in 2022

| No | Name of the country | Value in US \$ (Million) | Partner Share % |
|----|----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. | China | 76.822 | 18.22 |
| 2. | India | 31.971 | 7.58 |
| 3. | South Africa | 26.176 | 6.21 |
| 4. | United Arab Emirates | 23.430 | 5.56 |
| 5. | United States | 20.283 | 4.81 |

Source: Word Integrated Trade Solution, 2022.

The above evidence suggests that the nature of the SSA nations’ relationships with Beijing is to provide a long-term, secure supply of energy and minerals to China in exchange for Chinese investment in the arms supply, energy, metals, and mining sectors of these economies, as well as the export of Chinese construction services in the transport and real estate sectors.

While India’s involvement in SSA is not as large presently, it too is expanding at amazing rates. India’s resource needs are also likely to increase. Indian engagement in Africa has deepened based largely on realist assessments of domestic needs that increased cooperation with Africa. In this direction, India has spent around USD 12 billion on infrastructure, water supply, and technology improvements. India also trained many African professionals regularly through ITEC (Technical and Economic Cooperation) to maintain long-term relationships with African countries. In the years 2018-2022, India opened around 18 embassies in Africa to strengthen friendly diplomatic relations (Aurora, 2015). The rise of domestic factors undergirding India’s foreign policy in SSA, as well as the continued importance of systemic factors, is likely to continue to drive enhanced Indo-African ties in the 21st century. Nigeria supplies about a quarter of its imports to India, and it is the second-largest source of imported oil (after Saudi Arabia) (Passi, 2017). So, it would be worthwhile to raise the various questions in the context of the proposed research. Would better governmental investment policies and good mutual ties with SSA ensure a better future? What are the changes made by the government in foreign policy and diplomacy for national security? Are these initiatives making any changes to India’s appearance in SSA? These questions are proposed to be tested in this research.

Research Works Reviewed

There is no lack of literature on research problems. Amatya (2020), in his article “Chinese Smart Power”, explained how China has quickly changed from an underdeveloped country to a key player in international politics. China understands the scene in international relations and prepares a centralised plan to acquire political and economic gains. Mishra (2019) in his “How Indian and Chinese involvement in Africa differs in intent, methods and outcomes”, discussed how Africa is important for global growth, offering multiple opportunities. As Asia’s two major economies, India and China, have plunged into this emerging African opportunity. Both countries are shaping new techniques, policies, and projects of engagement with Africa and how they impact the lives of ordinary African citizens. Roy (2014) also examined the diplomatic relationship of China and India in Africa, and also explained how India and China are shifting their strategy of politics, ideology and economics to trade and investment to secure their future in Africa, under the title “China and India, ‘Rising Powers’ and African development: Challenges and opportunities”. Lubold (2022), in his following article “China’s Growing Influence in Africa Seen in Arms Trade and Infrastructure Investment”, discussed how China is becoming a major arms supplier in Africa and how other countries try to counter China’s dominance because, before China, there were many other big nations that dominated the sector. The same issue was discussed by an economist in 2024, under the title of “China Pushes Russia out of Africa arms market”. According to this report, between the time period 2019 and 2023 ^[6], about 21 African countries received weapons from China on very low price compared to other countries. Mariani (2021) ^[12] is another scholar who

examined the issue of China's arms exports to Sub-Saharan Africa in the years between 2016 and 2020.

China was the second-ranked supplier of arms to sub-Saharan Africa, and China is the one in transferring arms and ammunition that are eventually used in African conflicts. IMF (2023) ^[5] "At a Crossroads: SSA's Economic Relations with China" examined the economic relations between China and SSA over the last two decades and also discussed how China faced criticism from other nations for its dominance in the region. Goode and Nehru Pillay (2007) ^[13] depict "Impact of China and India on SSA metals, ores, and minerals issues and Challenges", explaining the capability of SSA and its contribution to the mineral resources fuelling the growth of the dynamic Asian economies of India and China. KapLinsky, Dorothy McCormick, and Mike Morris (2008), in their article "China and Sub-Saharan Africa: Impacts and Challenges of a Growing Relationship", discussed many questions regarding the appearance of China in African countries. The relationship between China, India, and SSA is not new; their relations have grown since 1990, as examined by Jenkins (2006) in his research article "The economic impacts of China and India on Sub-Saharan Africa: Trends and prospects".

The available literature on the research problem reveals that China, India, and African countries are linked to each other politically, economically, and socially. However, the impact of the dominance of China and India in Africa as major players is increasing day by day.

Identification of Research Gap

The present study has evaluated the growing contributions of China and India in Africa, especially in arms supply, infrastructure, economic and political sectors and also analysed how both diverge in their objectives and manner. The present article has explored the influence of China and India in SSA in terms of their appearance in the region, different purposes, and how both countries use different methods, outcomes and impact on SSA countries in the long term. The study also examines the psychology of SSA countries directly connected to China and India, while seeking solutions to the problems faced by these countries and recommending new strategies based on the research outcomes. At this point, the realist theory preferred to evaluate the relationship between China, India, and the SSA countries.

Objectives of the Proposed Study

- To analyse the nature and differences of the influence of China and India in SSA and their diverse impact on SSA countries.
- To examine the long-term investments by India in SSA for development, and the approach behind it.
- To explore the fallacies adopted by China in SSA to promote exports, especially arms supply and how China is taking advantage of African problems.
- To evaluate the long-term impact of China and India on the lives of SSA peoples.

Major Research Questions

- Is in the Realist world, state actors always try to expand their power more and more, and there is no space for morality in the contest of China and India's influence in SSA?

- Is it deficient in the accomplishment of moral mechanisms at the international level, and a lack of rectifying the genuine partners for genuine trade according to problems faced by particular countries, responsible for China's dominance in arms supply in Africa?
- Will the interference of third countries in Africa's inventiveness, favoritism of China based on investment and trade, be reduced?

Framework and Methods Proposed for Research

The present study is exploratory in nature. The research has collected data from both primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources include published articles, books, magazines, newspapers, other periodicals, various official websites, and contemporary media. With the information gathered, we can compare the growing contributions of China and India in Africa and their differences in objectives, approaches, and outcomes. While choosing SSA as a case study, attempts were made to give representation in export, import, and developmental investments. The results were qualified and analysed with the help of qualitative and quantitative research strategies.

India and SSA Relations: A Brief History

India and Africa are not new to each other; both have a long history of relations. That is the reason why the respective prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, used the term Sister Continent, to recognise the responsive historical ties with the region. Even after WWII, India centered it is policy towards Africa in two ways (Kolgushkina,2023) ^[5].

1. India is always ready to provide economic and political support to the region, and for that purpose, India has raised its voice for equal attention to African countries in the UNO (Kolgushkina, 2023) ^[5].
2. Secondly, India is also trying to establish close relations with the Indian diaspora community in the region. Those were settled there on the east coast of Africa long before the colonial decade. And they were significantly extending their business in shipping and becoming a strong middle class. India tried to strengthen economic relations with them (Kolgushkina, 2023) ^[5].

For the above-mentioned determinations, the Indian leaders have visited Africa very often, with the continent hosting Indian Prime Ministers approximately 76 times since 1960 (Nantulya, 2023) ^[9]. Conversely, India has welcomed almost 100 leaders from Africa, facilitating cultural, educational, economic, and agricultural connections. India also tries to guide the young generation of the African Region for good governance by educating them through institutions like the Indian International Institute of Democracy and Election Management. The main purpose of these institutions is to train hundreds of African citizens for a better future. Now the efforts of the Indian prime minister, Mr Narendra Modi and the African Union are included as permanent members in the G-20 at the New Delhi summit in September 2023 (Nantulya, 2023) ^[6, 9].

In the economic sphere, India is the second largest partner of Africa and channels its aid to Africa through the African Development Bank (ADB), joined in 1983. Subsequently, the main objective of this research is to find out how India becomes a good partner of SSA countries without the interference of China. Through the following dialogue, this

research will reveal how India is getting closer to this region and how China is making it difficult by using its soft and hard powers in the region. The following table (4) describes the commodity exchange

between India and African countries. Both regions have completed almost 30 years of bilateral relations, beginning with the period when Mahatma Gandhi visited Africa and kindled the Satyagraha movement (IBEF, 2025) ^[1].

Table 4: Trade of Commodities between India and African Countries

| Sr. no | Countries | Commodities |
|--------|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. | India | Import: minerals, metals, oil and natural gas Export: machinery, automobiles, chemicals, textiles and agricultural products |
| 2. | China | Import: raw materials such as crude oil, copper, cobalt, and iron ore Export: manufactured goods like electronics and machinery* |

Source: Government of India, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, 2023; *Munyati, 2024 (World Economic Forum).

Table 5: Trade between India and Sub-Saharan Africa (USA \$ Billion)

| Countries | 2018-2019 | 2019-2020 | 2020-2021 | 2021-2022 | 2022-2023 |
|------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Exports to SSA | 22.65 | 23.55 | 22.93 | 33.08 | 42.85 |
| Imports from SSA | 35.4 | 32.15 | 23.89 | 41.77 | 39.27 |
| Total | 58.05 | 55.7 | 46.82 | 74.86 | 82.13 |

Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Department of Commerce, 2024

The above table (5) examines the import and export trade between India and the SSA region during the time period of 2018 to 2023^[11]. The overhead data revealed that the exports from India to SSA increased day by day except in the years 2020 to 2021. However, imports from SSA are not the same way. In the years 2018 and 2019, the imports were 35.4 billion USD, but the growth decreased to 32.15 billion USD in the years 2019 and 2020, while taking a dip to 23.89 billion USD in 2020 and 2021. In the years 2021 to 2022, imports again increased positively to 41.77 billion US dollars and decreased slightly in the years 2022 to 2032 to 39.27 billion US dollars. So, the above table shows how both countries are continually linked with each other.

The authorities from both sides are regularly interacting with each other to develop a close partnership and extend trade relations. Ten principles of cooperation with Africa were articulated by the respective Prime Minister Narendra Modi in April 2018 when he visited Uganda. These ten principles are the key pillars of the relationship between India and Africa; these ten principles are

- Create new opportunities and capabilities
- Greater market access to Africa and greater investments in Africa
- Use of digital tools to support Africa’s development
- Enhance agricultural productivity
- Address climate change challenges
- Combating terrorism together and fostering peace and security
- Free and open oceans for all
- Cooperation on promoting the aspirations of Africans
- youth and collaboration on establishing
- Representative and democratic global order (CII, 2024).

These overhead stated principles show that the engagement with Africa has been a top priority for the Indian Government. During 2019, 18 new diplomatic missions were established in Africa, and a revamp of the Indian Development and Assistance (IDEAS) scheme was suggested, under which Lines of Credit are extended to countries abroad at concessional rates (CII, 2024). The engagement of India in Africa was always observed differently because the relationship between the two

countries enjoyed fraternal ties. Both nations have a common colonial past and anti-colonial opinion; that is the reason why India never exploited the African countries in the past and will not do so in the future. Moreover, India’s foreign policy looks different from Africa’s. India is not sufficiently self-sufficient in oil and gas, and a possible collaboration with African countries could reduce India’s dependence on Russia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the United States for oil by 15 percent. India also wants an amendment in IPR (intellectual property rights) in favour of all needy countries for oil cleaning technology (Kumar, 2009).

Africa and China’s Relations: A Brief History

Africa and China also had a long historical link. Actually, Africa plays a very important role in China’s investment policy. This was the reason China created its “Going Out” policy in 1999 for Africa. Through this policy, China will establish that companies outside China also established FOCAC (Forum for China-Africa Cooperation) in 2003 to improve cooperation and strategic initiatives in Africa. That was the first tri-annual forum created by China for Africa (OBE & Jon Wallace, 2023) ^[7]. According to the IMF (International Monetary Fund), China has the biggest trading partner in the SSA Region. Almost 20 percent of the region’s natural resources are exported to China only, and 16 percent imports from China. This amounted to around 282 billion USD in the year of 2023^[6]. China’s main imported items are (mineral products, petroleum and metals), and in return, SSA imports Chinese electronics, manufacturing and machinery. Moreover, China also invested in mining, energy financing and provided loans to the needy countries in the Sub-Saharan Region (Munyati, 2025).

The following table (6) will show the data from the International Debt Statistics (IDS) database. According to the following table, the total external debt of Africa increased day by day in 2013, reaching 471.58 US billion USD and increased by almost double the amount in 2021, reaching 841.08 and 863.24 US billion USD in 2023^[7]. These statistics show that China is dominating African countries not only technologically, socially, and culturally, but also economically.

Table 6: Total Debt Due by the African Countries (US billion USD)

| Sr no. | Years | Price | Current Value |
|--------|-------|-------|---------------|
| 1. | 2013 | 100 | 471.58 |
| 2. | 2014 | 200 | 511.80 |
| 3. | 2015 | 300 | 515.33 |
| 4. | 2016 | 400 | 560.87 |
| 5. | 2017 | 500 | 655.14 |
| 6. | 2018 | 600 | 697.26 |
| 7. | 2019 | 700 | 697.26 |
| 8. | 2020 | 800 | 786.42 |
| 9. | 2021 | 900 | 825.62 |
| 10. | 2022 | 1000 | 841.08 |
| 11. | 2023 | 1100 | 863.24 |

Source: International Debt Statistics Data, 2024

The above table indicates that China is a very important trade partner in SSA. China is not only providing loans, but also arranging for technical, social and political support (Zafar, 2007) ^[13]. China is the second major arms supplier after Russia in the SSA, and almost 22 percent of arms and military equipment are imported by China at very cheap rates. The size of the Chinese population in the region has increased day by day, and all of them are permanent residents in the region. Major areas are Zambia, Madagascar, Ghana, South Africa and the Republic of the Congo. The involvement of China in the region is a form of new imperialism (Cheraghrou and Naomi Aladekoba, 2023). So now, after all, it will be essential to differentiate the objectives and techniques adopted by both countries, India and China, in Africa, especially in SSA, their national purpose.

Major Targeted Area of China in SSA

China is the second major player in SSA after Russia. The main focused areas of China in SSA are the development of infrastructure, such as maintaining ports, dams and roads. Import natural resources, minerals, oil, arms supply, and BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). China, with the help of these areas, tries to dominate the region (Foster, 2009) ^[4].

Is BRI a new form of imperialism?

BRI is a new Chinese strategy to connect directly with other nations for trade. With the help of BRI, China will develop the global infrastructure to dominate the global economy. Actually, BRI is an overland Silk Road Economic Belt, and with the help of this road, China has built roads, railways, and ports globally and expanded its trade. The main purpose of BRI is to boost China's global trade and seek markets for its products (Krishnan, 2023) ^[6].

Arms supply to SSA countries by China

China is not only actively involved in the trade of natural resources, but also very energetic in arms supply to SSA countries. Nowadays, China has become the dominant arms supplier in the region after Russia. According to the Military Magazine published by ADF 2024 ^[2], China is the largest exporter of arms in SSA. The weapons included: rockets, drones, firearms, space systems, ammunition and electronic warfare, etc. Between the years 2019 and 2023 ^[6], 21 countries in the SSA received large deliveries of arms. According to the SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institution), seven out of ten countries of SSA are using arms delivered by China (ABF, 2024) ^[2].

There are some reasons why SSA countries are willing to trade with China

- Cheap Rates
- China is Providing Loan also
- Supper power
- BRI
- Russia is busy in war
- Infrastructure
- Presence of India in Sub Saharan African Region

The aforesaid reasons showed that Sub-Saharan African countries are dependent on China. This is the only country that delivers arms to African countries at very cheap rates, and also provides loans to African countries. Another reason SSA countries are dependent on China is that Russia is busy with war, India is actively investing in the region, and China is not feeling secure. That was the added reason for China's presence in the SSA region.

New Market for Future Supplies and the Need for Natural Resources

Identical to other countries, China's worries are centred around its future and national needs. The SSA region is more than adequate in natural resources and needy too in economic, security, infrastructure, and political control. China is ready to provide them all in a very generous way. The following reasons why China is investing in SSA:

Prosperity in Natural Resources

Already discussed SSA is rich in natural resources like oil, copper, and raw materials, all of which are very essential for China's manufacturing sector (Ademuyiwa, 2025) ^[1].

Opening of a New Market

For developed countries, the major challenge is to find new markets for their manufactured products. SSA is a very suitable market for China; it can sell its products in this region at very cheap rates, and Africans are very content to buy them. SSA is becoming a very large consumer market for China (Ademuyiwa, 2025) ^[1].

Infrastructure and connectivity with other countries

China is correspondingly investing in infrastructure, such as preparing or maintaining roads, ports, and railway stations at very cheap rates. This will help to China to travel very easily from one place to another, and it will also help to China to connect with other countries with these facilities. BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) is a very good example of this (Ademuyiwa, 2025) ^[1].

Expansion in Currency

Expansion in currency is another reason China invested in SSA. China wants to use its currency internationally through financial dealings in SSA (Ademuyiwa, 2025) ^[1].

Global competition and Dominance

China always tries to use investment in SSA as a diplomatic tool to create a good image globally, especially in international forums like the UN. Investment in SSA is a part of China's border strategy to counter Western dominance (Zafar, 2007) ^[13].

Conclusion

Absolutely, it's accurate that Africa is not the periphery of diplomatic politics at the global level; nowadays, it emerges

as a fundamental arena, owing to natural resources and the young population. The extant study will discover how and why India and China are captivated by curiosity to build virtuous relations with African countries, especially the SSA region. And how both of the nations are using different methods, ideologies, and objectives to accomplish their goals in SSA. The present study depicts that India's relations with Africa are not new. Both struggled together against colonialism, and India has historically supported African nations. Permanent membership in G-20, with the help and support of Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi in 2023 ^[11], in the capital of India, New Delhi, is a superlative sample to confirmation of how India treats Africa. There are many reasons India invested in SSA, like accessing the natural resources, growing new markets, economic growth, and trying to build a developmental partnership at a global level. Through these ties, India likes to boost agendas in Africa under the catchphrase of South-South Cooperation

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