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## Reversing the Continental Drift



**Mahesh Sachdev**



*Over 35 heads of states of African countries are likely to attend the third India-Africa Forum Summit later in October. Picture shows MEA Secretary (West) Navtej Singh Sarna inviting Ms. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Chairperson of African Union Commission.*

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Geologically, eons ago, peninsular India was once part of Africa, the fused 'Super-Continent' called 'Gondwanaland'. Some 200 million years ago when the continental drift started, the region broke away from the African continent and pushed in a north-easterly direction till it joined South Asia.

In the economic domain, too, till recently there had been a similar sense of drift between India and Africa. The two sides were only partially able to leverage their socio-economic similarities (such as a colonial history, similar developmental profile and challenges) and complementarities (such as India's growing need for Africa's commodities and the suitability of Indian technology and spirit of *jugaad* for Africa). More often than not, it was left to private operators, market forces and middlemen. As a result there was a steady but slow growth in our ties with Africa, often called 'the only remaining economic Eldorado' for its fast-growing population, increasing prosperity, and its untapped mineral and agricultural wealth.

Thus, the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) process that began in 2008 is a much needed intergovernmental attempt to give a direction and thrust to the bilateral synergy. After two summits in New Delhi (2008) and Addis Ababa (2011), the next summit is to take place towards the end of this month once again in New Delhi. This time heads of states and governments of all African countries have been invited and over 35 of them are likely to attend. A number of new Indian initiatives are likely to be announced during IAFS-3 to boost ties.

### **Resources Committed**

As we approach IAFS-3, it is necessary to assess the impact of over seven years of the IAFS process and make it more effective and purposive. Over this period, India has committed unprecedented level of resources to Africa: for instance, at IAFS-2 India promised \$5 billion dollars in soft loans, half a billion dollars in grants, institution building and training fellowships to Africa. Earlier at IAFS-1, India had offered duty-free market access to Africa's least developed countries. Injection of these resources has had considerable impact. India's credentials as a uniquely suitable development partner for Africa have been widely acknowledged. There has been a welcome surge in people-to-people contacts as large numbers of African entrepreneurs, medical tourists, trainees and students have started coming to India and Indian experts and entrepreneurs have headed there. Similarly, the IAFS process has given a fillip to cultural and informational contacts and mutual awareness. The growth in India's trade and investment activities with Africa has been partially affected by the global economic slowdown. Though the actual delivery of projects and institutions has improved, it is still not commensurate with the higher resources expended.

Before we proceed further, a few of the contextual factors must be mentioned. First, India is not alone in having an Africa strategy. Our competitors on the continent, such the European Union, China, Japan and the U.S. also have IAFS-type processes and often commit even more resources than we do. Second, in recent years, new drivers of the putative African century have emerged; these include lower commodity

prices, greater democracy, rise in militancy, population growth, preponderance of youth and urbanisation. Last but not the least, although Africa has lost some of its economic attractiveness, the long-term importance of the continent is undimmed.

## **Visible Engagement**

How can the momentum achieved so far by the IAFS process be sustained or even accelerated? First, we need to inject greater bilateralism and balance into the process. The African nations, many of them with higher per capita income than India, expect India to bear gifts for them under the IAFS process. But they also need to contribute more, so that the joint endeavour is more productive for their own people. This is also because India does not have a mercantilist approach to get back its developmental assistance in other ways. Similarly, India should not abrogate its responsibility for mid-stream and downstream delivery to the African Commission bureaucracy. This has often caused confusion and dismay among bilaterally important countries such as Nigeria for being neglected. It has also deprived our diplomats in Africa a valuable card to promote our bilateral agenda. (During the writer's tenure in Africa, it was often necessary to mention that the project was implemented and financed by India, and not by the African Union!)

Second, the IAFS process needs to better leverage two strong assets that have hitherto remained untapped: the vibrant Indian private sector and the Indian diaspora in Africa. Third, a lot can be done to improve the last mile of the delivery chain to ensure efficacy. For instance, the \$150 million Pan Africa e-Network project has often received only limited interest because the actual providers had no personal incentive. Fourth, India needs to make more vigorous efforts to inform its African friends about its contributions. Last year, when the Ebola epidemic ravaged five West African countries, India rendered more assistance than many other donors. However, while their contributions were acknowledged and appreciated, Indian help received scant attention and publicity, partly because India delivered it multilaterally or in a piecemeal manner. A better organised, more coherent and faster responding mechanism accompanied by an appropriate media campaign is desirable. To this end, having a dedicated, commercially-driven Indian television channel for African countries may be a good beginning.

The IAFS process has shown the promise of Indo-African partnership. Indeed, the current global economic stagnation only enhances the relevance of a mutual interface between the world's fastest growing continent and the world's fastest growing major economy.

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