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## India-Africa Diplomatic Relations Under Modi: Worth the Hype?

Barnaby Joseph Dye

### Introduction

Diplomatic relations between India and Africa have expanded rapidly since the early 2000s. Symbolised by the launch of the India-Africa Forum Summits in 2008, efforts at building diplomatic profile and interactions have become increasingly high-level over the last 15 years. However, a longstanding complaint was that this governmental engagement lacked depth and was not sufficiently sustained between rare high-level summits. The Modi administration has claimed to rectify this. Early on, the administration hosted the symbolically important, high-level 2015 India-Africa Forum Summit, and the Prime Minister has since asserted the importance of Africa to India's foreign policy, articulating '10 Guiding Principles' for India-Africa ties in 2018. Have these efforts led to meaningful change in Indo-African relations since? This report analysis the metrics of embassies and visits to find out.

This paper shows that Indian diplomatic activity in Africa has increased, both in high-level diplomacy through summits and state visits, and through material changes 'on the ground' by opening and staffing embassies. The Modi administration held the 2015 Forum Summit, which was attended, for the first time, by the senior leadership (Foreign Minister, Prime Minister, Vice President, or President) of all countries of the continent. Visits from the President,

Vice-President, and Prime Minister also reached all-time highs. The number of visits undertaken in one year to countries around the continent increased from the previous record of 6 in 2011 to 9 in 2016 and then 10 in 2018.

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted diplomatic activity. Some events, such as the ExIm Bank-CII Conclave, have moved online, and a small number of visits have conducted by India's External Affairs Minister. However, the metrics analysed here do not suggest that the Modi administrations have revolutionised foreign policy with Africa; rather, they have followed the longstanding trajectory of gradual increases in diplomatic activity. Diplomatic activity has also lagged behind booming India-Africa trade, and contrasts with China's greater activity and resources. Arguably, enhanced Indian diplomatic activity could have increased the take-up of schemes like concessional finance, which to date still falls behind the funds made available/pledged. Despite recent budget increases and a boost to staff and embassies in Africa, India's diplomatic service will likely suffer from longstanding fiscal issues that have reduced the ability of the state to initiate, follow-up and implement agreements.

## Symbolic Diplomatic Statements

The Modi administration has made a number of major initiatives, events, and statements amounting to an acceleration of ties to Africa and emphasising the seriousness of India-Africa relations. Notable actions include hosting the 3rd India-Africa Forum Summit in 2015 with considerable fanfare and red-carpet treatment. The previous two summits in 2008 and 2011 used the African Union's Banjul Formula, which selects 15 representatives from across the continent. The third event was expanded to accommodate representatives from all African countries. Prime Minister Modi issued a 10-point declaration of principles in 2018 for guiding the country's engagement with the continent, reiterating Africa's strategic importance and India's commitment to development cooperation and trade. In diplomacy, such steps matter symbolically, demonstrating intent, values, and ties.

However, some analysts also conclude that Prime Minister Modi's stronger foreign-policy focus has translated into a wider, more material upgrade in relations with Africa outside the high-level summits. Key evidence cited includes an increase in embassies and diplomatic staff in Africa, and an increase in bilateral visits. How do these claims stack up? We now turn to metrics of India's embassies in Africa and the number of high-level visits.

## Signs of Real Change?

**Staff and Embassies in Africa:** Under the Modi administration, there has been an increase in embassies, with 13 opened since 2015, taking India's total on the continent to 43, depicted in figure 1. Five more are planned although they may be postponed, given the pandemic's financial impacts. The expansion of embassies is touted as a key diplomatic achievement of the Modi administration, aimed at addressing a longstanding issue in India's international relations, namely the low number of diplomatic staff and budget constraints experienced by the Indian Foreign Service. This allegedly stems from India's extraordinarily complex and demanding domestic political scene, which soaks up most

political energies of MPs, the leadership, and the civil service. India has far fewer diplomats than a number of comparative countries with rapidly rising economies seeking a stronger foothold in Africa. For example, a 2018 article stated that India had 940 diplomatic officers, only slightly higher than Singapore's 850, and far outreached by China's 7500 (Marlow, 2018). The Modi administration's action on embassies, and the related increase in staff, is therefore important, representing a major acceleration. However, should it be regarded as signifying a paradigmatic shift?

When viewed from a longer time-horizon, we can see the Modi government building on the previous 2004-2014 UPA administration, which also made an effort to boost diplomatic resources, reversing an earlier stagnation and decline in embassies in Africa, opening five between 2009-2012 as depicted in figure 1. Manmohan Singh also inaugurated the India-Africa Forum Summits and the Development Partnership Administration (DPA) in 2012. The DPA falls under of the Ministry of External Affairs, and its creation has increased the number of civil servants, who are working to deliver international development cooperation projects. These range from famine relief to technology transfer, training institutes and infrastructure loans, and together with military partnerships, form a bedrock of diplomatic relations with Africa. The additional capacity to handle such projects therefore matters for India-Africa relations. While changes under Modi's administration in the number of embassies and staff are not negligible, they are located in a longer trajectory in Indian policymaking.

**High Level Visits:** Another area highlighted by the current administration are high-level visits, including seven Prime Ministerial, 12 Presidential and eight Vice-Presidential official state visits from 2015. These 27 visits in just five years contrasts with a total of 23 visits made by the prior 2004-2014 UPA administration. The number of visits does therefore represent more of a break with the UPA approach, while the maps (figures 3 & 4) below also demonstrate a wider geographical spread, with greater inclusion of West Africa. Even here though, the UPA government was not idle. Whilst the

administrations of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi undertook a select number of visits as part of a commitment to the Non-Aligned movement, such trips were not frequent and petered out by the end of the 20th Century. A change can be traced to the mid-2000s, with the UPA administration starting a concerted diplomatic effort, reversing a previous decline in state visits to Africa, depicted in figure 2.

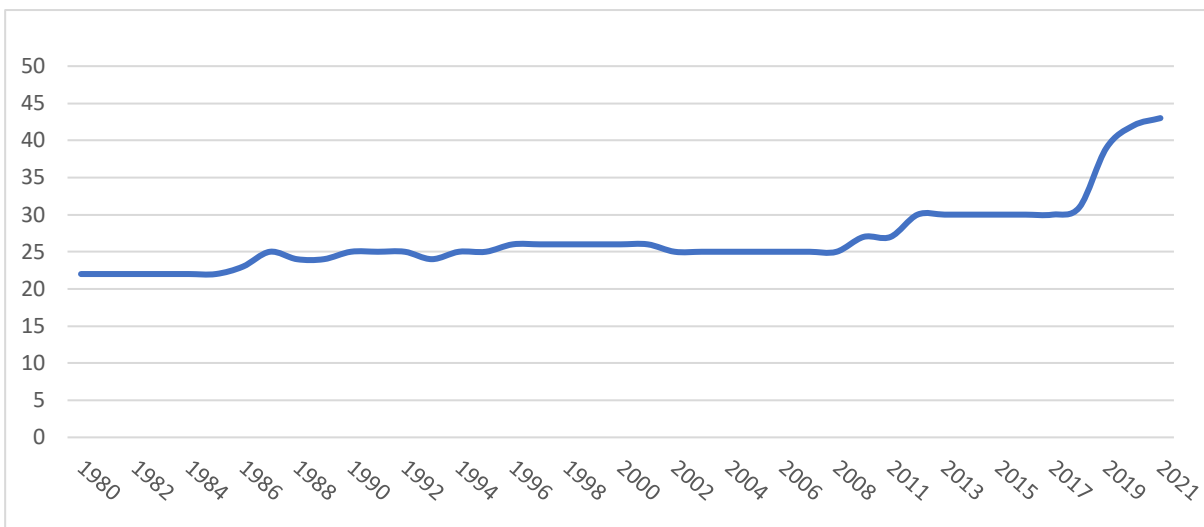


Figure 1 Total Number of Indian Embassies in Africa

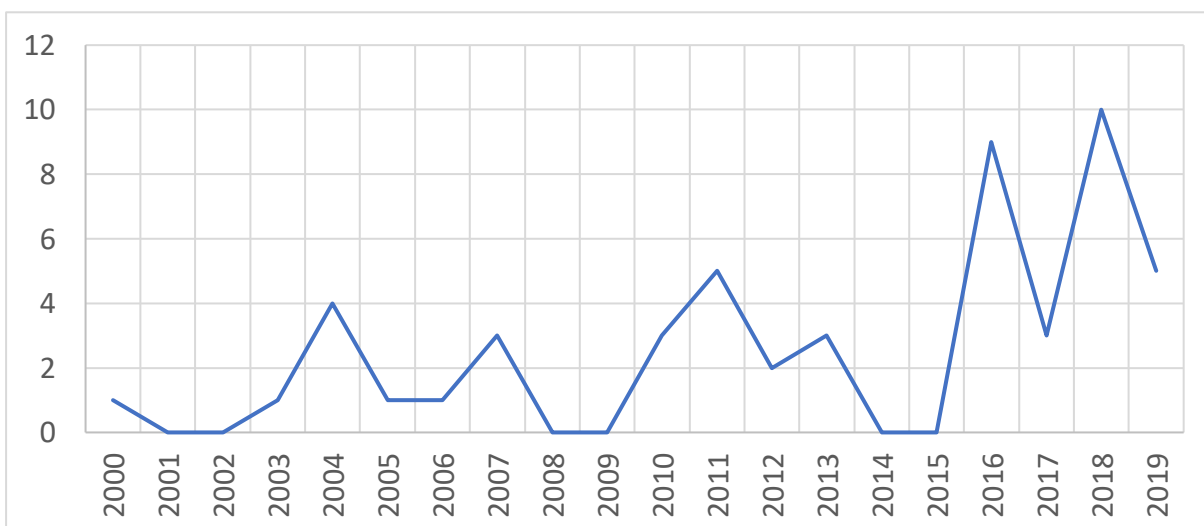
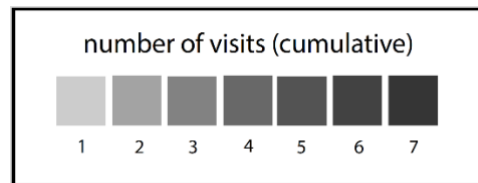


Figure 2 Number of Presidential, Vice-Presidential and Prime Ministerial Visits



Figure 3: The Number of Visits Undertaken by India's President, Vice President, and Prime Minister under the UPA Government (2004-2014)

Figure 4: The Number of Visits Undertaken by India's President, Vice Presidents, and Prime Minister under the UPA Government (2015-2021)



## Conclusions: Steady Change Not Transformations

The Modi administration has accelerated diplomatic relations in statistical terms, not least through high-level symbolic events and an expansion of the country's ambassadorial presence. Although this certainly represents an upturn, it does not appear to be a sharp change, as it continues the legacy and policy of the 2004-2014 UPA administration. This reinforces the impression that India's foreign policy direction remains an area of broad consensus amongst the political elite, one that continues long-term trajectories rather than swinging between different extremes, as has occurred with other large powers, perhaps most notably Brazil. However, despite the resources devoted by Modi, there is still a perception amongst a number of amongst foreign-policy analysts that India's diplomatic presence lacks strategy and is not commensurate with the volumes trade and investment (Venkatachalam & Modi, 2019; Wagner, 2019; Chakrabarty, 2021).

An insufficient number of diplomats, and experience in different African contexts, as well as constrained resources, are particularly blamed for the decreasing uptake of LoCs since 2015 (Dye, 2020, 2022). The Indian government is therefore keen to continue investment in foreign policy, including opening embassies (MEA, 2021). However, the pandemic is disrupting such efforts. The 4th India-Africa Forum Summit was originally scheduled for 2019, only to be delayed by an Ebola crisis, with further planned 2020 and 2021 events abandoned amidst Covid-19 concerns and restrictions. In contrast, China held its successful 8th China-Africa summit in 2021.

Whilst the Covid pandemic has stalled such progress, the higher number of embassies should provide a stronger platform for India to its reboot relations with the continent when public-health and policy space reopens. Renewed political attention will be required, however, to diplomatic visits and high-level summits to regain the momentum of the 2010s and expanding the number and quality of Indian foreign service personnel in Africa.



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