
India–Tanzania Relations in the Twenty-First Century: From Historical Solidarity to Strategic Partnership

Dr Poorvie

PhD, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

poorviedangi123@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The partnership with Tanzania is the best example of how India's engagement with Africa has evolved on the bilateral front. India's current policy toward Africa is often viewed within the framework of continental initiatives like the India-Africa Forum Summit or within the framework of relations with larger economies such as South Africa and Nigeria. Tanzania, however, has a special place. It has a historical affinity, as well as current strategic importance. Their relationship was based for decades on common anti-colonial experiences, the values of the Non-Aligned Movement and the commitment to South-South cooperation. Today, these historical foundations coexist alongside new drivers of cooperation shaped by changing geopolitical realities in the western Indian Ocean; the growing salience of maritime security; expanding economic links and the search for resilient development partnerships. Hence, the decision of India and Tanzania to elevate their relationship to a Strategic Partnership in October 2023 was not only a diplomatic milestone but also a recognition of the fact that bilateral cooperation had acquired a wider regional and global significance.

Much of the existing literature on India-Africa relations has been concerned with India's engagement with the continent, either vis-à-vis China's growing footprint or within the framework of broader debates on South-South co-operation (Alden, 2008; Naidu, 2008; Taylor, 2012). These studies have contributed significantly by giving an insight into the past evolution of India's Africa policy and its focus on development partnership and not conditional assistance. More recent work has considered India's role as an emerging power in the Indian Ocean, and its increased focus on maritime security, connectivity and capacity building (Brewster, 2014; Mohan, 2012). Nevertheless, despite its importance as India's largest development partner in Africa in terms of concessional credit commitments, a major destination for Indian investment and a key maritime partner in the western Indian Ocean, comparatively little scholarly attention has been paid to Tanzania itself.

There are several reasons why this imbalance in the literature is surprising. Tanzania is strategically located along the western Indian Ocean and links eastern and southern Africa to the wider Indo-Pacific maritime space. The ports of Dar es Salaam, Tanga and Zanzibar are gaining importance for regional trade and connectivity, while Tanzania's long coastline makes it a key player in discussions on maritime governance and the Blue Economy. Secondly, Tanzania has emerged as a key political player in the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), giving it a weight that goes beyond its national territory. Third, recent bilateral initiatives, including defence cooperation, maritime information sharing, digital public infrastructure, the setting up of IIT Madras campus in Zanzibar and cooperation in critical sectors such as health, education and energy, suggest that the relationship has gone far beyond its traditional diplomatic foundations. The evolution of the bilateral relationship also

reflects wider changes in India's foreign policy. Since the mid-2010s, New Delhi has increasingly connected its engagement in Africa to the western Indian Ocean, maritime security and regional connectivity. Concepts like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and more recent initiatives like the Africa India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME) show that Africa is not seen as only a development cooperation destination but as a critical part of India's wider strategic perspective. Tanzania has proved to be an important partner in this regard, blending political stability, a favourable investment climate and a strategic maritime location with long-standing diplomatic goodwill.

This paper argues that India–Tanzania relations have undergone a qualitative transformation from an ideologically driven partnership based on anti-colonial solidarity to a comprehensive strategic relationship driven by maritime geopolitics, development cooperation and economic statecraft. Rather than interpreting this evolution as simply consolidating bilateral ties, the paper places it within the framework of broader debates on India's evolving Africa policy and the increasing strategic significance of the western Indian Ocean. In doing so, it contributes to the literature by moving the focus away from continental narratives to the dynamics of a single bilateral partnership that captures many of the broader transformations taking place in India–Africa relations.

2. Historical Evolution of India-Tanzania Relations: From Indian Ocean Exchanges to Post-Colonial Solidarity

The contemporary relationship between India and Tanzania cannot be merely seen in terms of post-independence diplomacy. Long before either country existed as a sovereign state, the western Indian Ocean was a shared commercial and cultural space where merchants, sailors, religious communities and migrant labour circulated between the East African coast and the Indian subcontinent. Historically, the Indian Ocean has linked rather than divided societies through networks of trade, migration and exchange. As historians of the Indian Ocean such as K.N. Chaudhuri (1985), Michael Pearson (2003) and Sugata Bose (2006) have argued these maritime linkages have created a distinctive regional world long before the advent of European colonial powers. Thus, the relationship between India and the territories that now constitute Tanzania is several centuries older than the modern nation-state, and is rooted in a history of sustained interaction across the western Indian Ocean.

By the nineteenth century Indian merchants had established themselves firmly along the East African coast, especially in Zanzibar, Bagamoyo and Dar es Salaam. Omani control over Zanzibar and the integration of East Africa into broader Indian Ocean trade routes opened new opportunities for Gujarati traders, Khoja communities, Bohra merchants and Goan professionals. Their commercial activities extended beyond the trading of spices, textiles and manufactured goods to banking, shipping and retail networks that linked East Africa with Bombay, Karachi and Muscat (Pearson, 2003). Although these communities were small in proportion to the total population, they became an important intermediary between African producers and the global market, contributing to the economic development of the coastal towns, while retaining close cultural and commercial links with India (Bose, 2006). These interactions were transformed during the colonial period, but not severed. The Indian community continued to hold an influential position in the colonial economy under German East Africa and then under British administration after World War I.

Indian traders, artisans and professionals played an important role in commerce, public administration and transport. Indian labourers from the Indian subcontinent were involved in infrastructure projects throughout East Africa, including railway construction in neighbouring territories (Gregory, 1993). Colonial racial hierarchies however also created social divisions between European settlers, Asian commercial communities and African populations. These divisions would later shape nationalist politics in the last decades of colonial rule.

The first major political convergence between Indian and Tanganyikan leaders was the struggle against colonialism. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru led the successful Indian independence movement in 1947, showing that organised nationalist mobilisation could effectively challenge colonial rule. For many African leaders, including Julius Nyerere, India's experience offered not only symbolic inspiration but also practical lessons. Nyerere publicly recognised the importance of anti-colonial solidarity and maintained close relations with Indian political leaders throughout his career (Lal, 1995). While the nationalist trajectories of India and Tanganyika were vastly different, they shared a common commitment to decolonisation, racial equality and sovereign political development.

Formal diplomatic relations between the two countries began with the independence of Tanganyika in December 1961. India was among the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with the newly independent state and soon broadened cooperation in education, public administration and technical assistance (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2026). These initiatives were part of New Delhi's broader position on newly independent African countries in the early Cold War era. India wanted to project itself as a development partner, rather than a military or geopolitical competitor, and was able to use its own post-colonial experiences of state-building as lessons for Africa (Dubey, 1990). The personal rapport between Jawaharlal Nehru and Julius Nyerere was an important factor in the initial warmth in bilateral relations. Both felt that political independence was meaningless without economic sovereignty, and that newly decolonised countries would need more autonomy in an international system dominated by Cold War rivalry, whatever their domestic economic strategy. This consensus view was reflected in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) where India and Tanzania frequently adopted similar stances on issues such as decolonisation, apartheid, nuclear disarmament and reform of international economic relations (Prashad, 2007). Nyerere was one of the most influential voices in the movement in Africa and India also consistently supported the continent's liberation struggles through diplomatic advocacy as well as capacity-building initiatives.

The ideological basis of the relationship was strengthened through South–South cooperation. In the 1960s and 1970s, India increased technical assistance programs for African countries through what later grew into the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Program, established in 1964. Tanzania was one of the first to benefit with training in public administration, agriculture, engineering, medicine and education (MEA, 2026). Unlike much North-South development assistance in the Cold War era, Indian cooperation was aimed at developing human resources and institutional capacity, rather than providing direct financial assistance. As Amitav Acharya (2014) and Emma Mawdsley (2012) argue, this approach became one of the defining characteristics of India's broader development partnership model, distinguishing it from traditional donor-recipient relationships. During this period, however, economic activity was

relatively modest. Tanzania's Ujamaa socialism, launched with the Arusha Declaration in 1967, emphasised state-led development, collective farming and public ownership, compared to India's economy which was modelled on a highly regulated development model. The domestic policy choices constrained the scope for large-scale private investment and commercial expansion although bilateral trade in agricultural products, pharmaceuticals, machinery and consumer goods continued (Lal, 1995). Therefore, the relationship was still mainly political and developmental rather than commercial.

The end of the Cold War created a different context in which India and Tanzania related to each other. Following 1991, India's economic liberalisation and Tanzania's market-oriented reforms gradually shifted the bilateral agenda toward trade, investment and private-sector engagement. At the same time, East Africa was drawing up increasing attention from the world, with its strategic location along the western Indian Ocean and the emergence of new frontiers in infrastructure, natural gas, mining and maritime trade. These changes forced both governments to expand the relationship from its historical moorings, without abandoning the political good will that had been built up over previous decades.

While the legacy of anti-colonial solidarity still holds a prominent place in official narratives, contemporary India-Tanzania relations are not merely held together by history. The historical relationship provides political trust and diplomatic continuity, but the incentives for cooperation have changed substantially. Maritime security, regional connectivity, digital transformation, defence cooperation, education, healthcare and investment have become central pillars of the partnership. Thus, the upgrade of bilateral relations to a Strategic Partnership in 2023 is less a break with the past than an institutional recognition of a gradual shift that has occurred over more than three decades. To understand this transition, one must look at the political and diplomatic architecture that now underpins one of India's most important bilateral relationships in East Africa.

3. Political and Diplomatic Relations: From Political Amity to Strategic Convergence

There has always been a great deal of continuity in the political relationship between India and Tanzania. Although many bilateral relationships have experienced strategic oscillation, the relationship between India and Tanzania has grown incrementally rather than through abrupt shifts in policy. Much of the strength of this engagement can be attributed to the political trust built in the anti-colonial era but historical affinity alone cannot explain the growing intensity of bilateral cooperation in the last decade. Increasingly, current political interaction is a reflection of the convergence of strategic interests in the western Indian Ocean, common views on reforming global governance and shared concerns on sustainable development, maritime security and South-South cooperation.

One of the hallmarks of India – Tanzania relations has been the frequency of high level political exchanges. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations following Tanganyika's independence in 1961, the leaders of the two countries have engaged in political dialogue through state visits, ministerial consultations and multilateral engagements. Julius Nyerere's repeated visits to India in the 1970s and 1980s developed a strong political rapport with the successive Indian Governments, while Indian leaders including Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, I.K. Gujral, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi have

steadily increased India's engagement with Tanzania. These exchanges have been not just for the sake of ceremony but have been used consistently to expand the agenda of bilateral cooperation to suit changing regional and international realities.

A discernible change in this respect was evident post 2014, when India's engagement with Africa gained greater strategic salience in its foreign policy. The government increasingly depicted Africa not just as a development partner but as a key element of India's broader Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific vision. This context made Tanzania more relevant because of its geographical position on the western Indian Ocean, its political stability and its influential role within the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). David Brewster (2014) argues that India's western Indian Ocean strategy is based on developing relations with politically stable littoral states that can assist in regional maritime governance. Tanzania is more closely aligned with this description than many other countries in the region, making it a natural strategic partner. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Tanzania in July 2016 was an important milestone in the recalibration of bilateral relations. During the visit, the two governments agreed to enhance cooperation in defence, maritime security, agriculture, healthcare, water resources and capacity building and reiterated their shared commitment to fighting terrorism and enhancing maritime safety in the Indian Ocean. More importantly, the visit demonstrated that India's Africa policy had begun to move beyond the traditional development assistance to broader strategic engagement which included security and regional connectivity. Scholars such as Aparajita Biswas (2021) have characterised this period as a transition from India's normative Africa policy to a more comprehensive model of political, economic and strategic objectives. The most significant development in bilateral relations was the State Visit of President Samia Suluhu Hassan to India in October 2023. During the visit, the two countries officially raised their relations to the level of a Strategic Partnership, signifying a qualitative transformation in the bilateral framework. The partnership was based on four main pillars as set out in the Joint Statement: political and diplomatic cooperation; trade and investment; defence and maritime security; and people-to-people engagement. The Strategic Partnership formalised the process of expanding cooperation that had been gaining pace for years, rather than being a singular diplomatic act. It also reflected an appreciation of the central role that Tanzania plays in India's engagement with East Africa and the western Indian Ocean.

The Strategic Partnership is important not only for bilateral relations. It reflects the coming together of Indian and Tanzanian positions on many regional and global issues. Both governments have long supported reform of multilateral institutions, particularly the United Nations Security Council, arguing that current governance structures no longer adequately reflect contemporary geopolitical realities. India has always been receptive to the call for greater African representation in global institutions. Tanzania has backed India's aspirations to become a permanent member of a reformed Security Council. Tanzania had welcomed India's successful push for the African Union to become a permanent member of the G20 during India's presidency of the grouping in 2023, calling it "an important step toward strengthening African representation in global economic governance." This convergence also marks wider shifts in African diplomacy. Rather than aligning with any of the major power poles, Tanzania has adopted a diversified foreign policy to maintain good relations with a variety of partners. This approach has been increasingly described by scholars as one of strategic diversification, whereby African states seek to maximise political



and economic opportunity, while avoiding undue dependence on any individual external actor (Alden & Large, 2019; Brown & Harman, 2013). This diplomatic approach has been complemented by India's own emphasis on partnership rather than alliance. Unlike the traditional donor-recipient relations, India has generally followed an engagement that emphasises capacity building, institutional cooperation and respect for national ownership, principles that are in tune with Tanzania's long-standing foreign policy orientation.

Another important characteristic of bilateral diplomacy has been the growing institutionalisation of political dialogue. Today, relations are sustained not only through summit level engagements but also through Joint Commission Meetings, Foreign Office Consultations, parliamentary exchanges, defence dialogues and sector specific ministerial mechanisms. Such institutional arrangements reduce dependence on individual political leaders and promote continuity of bilateral engagement across changes of government. The establishment of these mechanisms is particularly important as it signals the growth of bilateral ties from personal diplomacy to institutional partnerships.

Political cooperation is increasingly interlinking with economic diplomacy. High level visits are now regularly accompanied by delegations of businessmen, investment forums and agreements on technology, digital innovation, education and healthcare. During President Hassan's 2023 visit, government agencies, universities and private-sector firms signed a series of agreements in various sectors, reflecting the increasing depth of bilateral engagement beyond traditional diplomacy. The Indian Institute of Technology Madras Zanzibar campus, the first overseas campus of an IIT, is perhaps the most visible symbol of this wider political commitment to long-term institution building as against project-based cooperation. The political relationship has also taken on an increasingly maritime dimension. Both countries realise that developments in the western Indian Ocean in areas like piracy, maritime crime and the security of sea lines of communication have a direct bearing on their economic interests. This common perception has strengthened the political impetus for enhanced defence cooperation, maritime domain awareness and naval engagement. The joint hosting of the Africa India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME) in Dar es Salaam in 2025 by India and Tanzania is indicative of how bilateral political relations are increasingly embedded within wider regional security initiatives. Instead of focusing only on bilateral defence cooperation, both governments have sought to locate their partnership within a broader context of cooperative maritime security with African littoral states.

The evolution of political ties thus mirrors a larger evolution of India's relationship with Africa. Ideological solidarity and diplomatic support for decolonisation dominated the previous decades. Today's political engagement is characterised by a strategic convergence in a whole range of domains. Historical trust remains an important asset, but it is now the foundation for a partnership defined by maritime geopolitics, regional connectivity, development partnership and common positions on the future of multilateral governance. The strategic partnership announced in 2023 should therefore not be considered a new start, but rather the formalisation of a partnership that has seen its political foundations grow deeper over the last two decades.

4. Trade, Investment and Development Partnership: From Development Assistance to Economic Statecraft

The economic relationship between India and Tanzania has undergone a profound transformation over the past three decades. During much of the Cold War, bilateral cooperation was primarily driven by political solidarity and technical assistance, while commercial engagement remained relatively modest owing to the inward-looking economic strategies pursued by both countries. The economic liberalisation in India in 1991 and the market-oriented reforms in Tanzania during the same period changed the course of bilateral relations fundamentally. Since then, trade, investment and development cooperation have become the key drivers of engagement, with a growing private-sector participation and enhanced institutional mechanisms. But the evolution of the relationship cannot be reduced to growing trade volumes. Rather, it signals a broader shift in India's Africa policy from ideological partnership to economic statecraft that is concerned with capacity building, institution creation and long-term development cooperation.

Today Tanzania is an important place in India's economic engagement with Africa. It is consistently among India's leading trading partners in East Africa and has become one of the largest recipients of Indian concessional Lines of Credit on the continent. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, India is among Tanzania's major sources of foreign investment, with Indian companies active in pharmaceuticals, agriculture, manufacturing, mining, information technology, banking and energy. The Indian business community is one of the largest foreign commercial presence in the country with over 700 Indian owned enterprises estimated to be operating in Tanzania (MEA, 2026; High Commission of India, Dar es Salaam, 2026). This commercial footprint is also bolstered by the long-established Indian diaspora, particularly in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar, which has traditionally been a vital bridge between the two economies. While bilateral trade has been growing at a steady pace over the last two decades, its composition exposes both opportunities as well as structural constraints. Official trade data indicate that bilateral trade has generally fluctuated between US\$6 billion and US\$8 billion annually in recent years, making Tanzania one of India's largest trading partners in sub-Saharan Africa (Department of Commerce, Government of India, 2025). Indian exports are dominated by petroleum products, pharmaceuticals, automobiles, engineering goods, machinery, textiles and chemical products, while imports from Tanzania are mainly gold, pulses, cashew nuts, timber, coal, precious stones and other mineral products. The asymmetry in the export composition reflects broader differences in industrial capacity, with India exporting manufactured goods with higher value added and importing mainly primary commodities. Similar trade patterns have been observed in India's commercial relations with several African economies (Naidu, 2008; Taylor, 2012).

While expanding trade has undoubtedly strengthened economic ties, its long-term sustainability depends upon greater diversification. Scholars studying India-Africa trade have repeatedly argued that commodity-centred trade relationships are vulnerable to fluctuations in global prices and demand (Alden & Vieira, 2005; Broadman, 2007). Tanzania's growing focus on industrialisation as part of its Development Vision 2025 and India's own needs for boosting manufacturing and resilient supply chains offer opportunities to move beyond traditional commodity exchange. There is much greater scope for mutually beneficial industrial co-operation in sectors such as agro-processing, pharmaceuticals, digital services, renewable energy equipment and light manufacturing than in traditional merchandise trade alone.

Investment has emerged as an equally important pillar of the bilateral economic engagement. Indian investment in Tanzania has historically been more sectorally diversified, unlike many external partners whose investments have been largely focused on large-scale infrastructure or extractive industries. Indian companies are involved in manufacturing, healthcare, telecommunications, financial services, agriculture and consumer industries, helping generate employment and transfer technology. Companies such as Bharti Airtel, Bank of Baroda, Canara Bank, Exim Bank-backed enterprises and a number of pharmaceutical manufacturers have established a sustained commercial presence in Tanzania. While precise estimates of cumulative Indian investment vary across sources because of differing reporting methodologies, the Government of India consistently identifies Tanzania as one of the principal destinations for Indian private investment in Africa (MEA, 2026). A major feature of India's economic engagement has been the emphasis on development partnership rather than the conventional aid. Emma Mawdsley (2012) argues that India's development cooperation differs from traditional donor models because it places greater emphasis on responding to partner-country priorities, avoiding political conditionalities and building local institutional capacity. Tanzania is a particularly good example of this. India has also combined concessional financing, technical cooperation, training programs and institutional partnerships to support Tanzania's development objectives rather than concentrating only on grant assistance. This approach is very much in conformity with the principles articulated during successive India-Africa Forum Summits where demand-driven cooperation and national ownership have been consistently emphasised (MEA, 2015).

One of the key instruments that have helped sustain this model has been the Indian Lines of Credit (LoCs) administered through the Export–Import Bank of India. Tanzania has been one of the biggest beneficiaries of Indian concessional finance in Africa. They have financed projects in water supply, agriculture, transport, power transmission and rural infrastructure. Concessional LoCs are a mix of favourable financing terms and technical expertise unlike commercial lending while also encouraging Indian companies to participate in project implementation. Some scholars have expressed scepticism about the pace of implementing Line of Credit projects in Africa (Mawdsley, 2018). Tanzania's experience, however, shows that this financing has been crucial for addressing infrastructure constraints and boosting bilateral economic relations. Human resource development constitutes another distinctive dimension of India's development partnership. Thousands of Tanzanian officials, engineers, doctors, diplomats and public administrators have been trained in India since the introduction of Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program in 1964. They range across fields as diverse as information technology, public administration, renewable energy, banking, disaster management and parliamentary procedures. Capacity-building activities of this sort have often generated less academic interest than infrastructure financing, but they constitute one of India's most durable contributions to institution building in Africa (Mawdsley, 2012; Biswas, 2015). The programs have a long-term impact that goes beyond technical skills, building professional networks that continue to shape bilateral relations decades after the participants have completed their training.

Another fast growing area of co-operation has been education. The establishment of the Indian Institute of Technology Madras Zanzibar Campus in 2023, is a significant milestone in the bilateral relations, and the internationalisation of higher education in India. It is the first overseas campus of an Indian Institute of Technology. The project signifies a move away from scholarship-based educational cooperation to institutional partnerships that can help build local human capital. The initiative also aligns with Tanzania's

desire to build capacity in science, technology and innovation and make India a long-term knowledge partner rather than just a provider of technical assistance. Development cooperation scholars increasingly argue that such institution-building initiatives lead to more sustainable developmental outcomes than disconnected infrastructure projects, as they enhance domestic capacity for innovation and skills development (Acharya, 2014; Mawdsley, 2018).

Healthcare and pharmaceuticals form yet another important dimension of the bilateral economic engagement. India has emerged as a major supplier of affordable generic medicines and medical equipment for Tanzania and Indian hospitals continue to attract Tanzanian patients for specialised treatment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, India supplied vaccines and essential medicines to Tanzania under the Vaccine Maitri initiative, reinforcing the role of health diplomacy within bilateral relations (MEA, 2022). This cooperation has been maintained through joint activities in the fields of telemedicine, pharmaceutical regulation and healthcare capacity building – areas likely to gain added significance as Tanzania seeks to enhance its public health infrastructure.

Yet, even with these achievements, there are still major challenges ahead. Bilateral trade continues to be concentrated in a small number of commodities, and Indian investment is concentrated in a small number of sectors. Several development projects are affected by bureaucratic procedures, logistical constraints and infrastructure deficits. Furthermore, Tanzania's increasingly competitive investment landscape means that India is competing not only with China but also with the European Union, Türkiye, Gulf states and other emerging partners offering finance, technology and infrastructure. The future success of India's economic engagement will be less about historical goodwill and more about its ability to deliver projects efficiently, encourage greater private sector participation and assist Tanzania's industrial transformation through technology transfer and skills development. The economic relationship between India and Tanzania is thus an example of a broader trend in India's Africa policy. Trade and investment remain important but they are part of a broader development partnership framework combining infrastructure financing, institutional cooperation, capacity building and knowledge sharing. This multi-pronged approach sets apart India's engagement from models based on resource extraction or large-scale infrastructure lending. Whether this model can continue to deliver tangible development outcomes in a growingly competitive geopolitical landscape will determine the future path of one of India's most significant bilateral partnerships in Africa.

5. Maritime Security and Defence Cooperation: The Western Indian Ocean as the New Strategic Frontier

For much of the post-independence era, maritime cooperation remained peripheral to the India–Tanzania relationship. The main pillars of engagement were political solidarity, technical cooperation and educational exchanges, whereas the Indian Ocean was largely viewed as a commercial space and not a theatre for strategic competition. In the first decade of the twenty-first century this began to change. The re-emergence of piracy off the Somali coast, the rapid proliferation of extra-regional naval deployments, increased competition for maritime infrastructure and the growing dependence of global trade on secure sea lanes have rendered the western Indian Ocean one of the most strategically important regions in contemporary geopolitics (Till, 2018; Brewster, 2014; Bueger, 2015). In this changing environment

Tanzania's geographical position assumed much greater importance than it had in former decades. With a coastline of 1,400 kilometres, close proximity to the Mozambique Channel and location along major sea lines of communication linking the Gulf, East Africa and southern Africa, it has become an increasingly important partner in India's maritime strategy (United Nations, 1982; African Union, 2014).

This transformation needs to be seen in the larger context of evolution in the maritime outlook of India. Earlier studies of India's Africa policy largely viewed the continent as an extension of New Delhi's development diplomacy (Dubey, 1990; Naidu, 2008). Recent scholarship, however, has indicated that India's engagement with Africa has become inextricably linked to its wider Indian Ocean strategy (Mohan, 2012; Brewster, 2018). According to David Brewster, there has been a gradual shift in Indian strategic thinking from a predominantly continental orientation to one that recognises the Indian Ocean as the primary arena through which its economic security and geopolitical interests are increasingly expressed (Brewster, 2014). This is evident in initiatives like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), announced in 2015, which focuses on collective maritime security, capacity building and cooperative regional governance rather than alliance politics (Government of India, 2015). In this context, Tanzania holds a significant position as it offers a mix of political stability and strategic geography, making it a natural partner for India's western Indian Ocean engagement.

Naval strategy and its increasing importance should not be the only way to look at maritime cooperation. Traditional notions of sea control and naval deterrence have long been surpassed by modern scholarship on maritime security. Christian Bueger (2015) identifies four interrelated dimensions of maritime security today: national security, economic development, human security and marine environmental governance. Likewise, Geoffrey Till (2018) notes that maritime security has become increasingly associated with resilience in global supply chains, governance of maritime resources and the performance of international trade. These conceptual developments are especially relevant for India-Tanzania relations as cooperation is being extended from defence to cover coastal surveillance, maritime law enforcement, disaster response, fisheries management and Blue Economy ventures. The common concern about non-traditional maritime threats has been one of the main reasons for increased maritime cooperation. Piracy off Somalia, which peaked between 2008 and 2012, changed the security perceptions in the western Indian Ocean. Although the piracy crisis did not directly affect Tanzania to the same extent as Somalia or Kenya, it highlighted the vulnerability of East African coastal states to transnational maritime crime and the economic consequences of insecure sea lanes (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2013). The rerouting of commercial vessels, increased insurance premiums and higher transport costs had an impact on regional trade and demonstrated the importance of collective maritime security. As Bueger (2013) observes, piracy provided an impetus for the emergence of new regional maritime governance mechanisms in the western Indian Ocean, encouraging greater cooperation between African states as well as with external partners. India's growing naval presence in anti-piracy patrols complemented these broader regional efforts and offered new opportunities for defence cooperation with Tanzania. Defence engagement between India and Tanzania has become more institutionalised in the last decade as a consequence. Instead of focusing only on military diplomacy or arms transfers, both countries have stressed training, professional military education and capacity building. Regular Staff Talks, training exchanges and port visits and the India-Tanzania Defence Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding have strengthened institutional links

between the two armed forces (MEA, 2026). Tanzanian defence personnel are regularly sent to Indian Military institutions, including the National Defence College and specialised training establishments for professional courses. Indian naval ships have stepped up goodwill visits to Tanzanian ports. Such activities point to what Rory Medcalf (2020) refers to as “networked security” in which long-term partnerships are built on institutional cooperation rather than formal military alliances.

The maritime dimension of bilateral relations received a new push following President Samia Suluhu Hassan’s state visit to India in October 2023. The new Strategic Partnership prioritises maritime security, defence industrial cooperation, hydrography and maritime domain awareness, the Joint Statement said (Government of India, 2023). This focus was a reflection of the common understanding that developments in the western Indian Ocean increasingly affect national security, economic prosperity and regional stability. Where Cold War-era defence cooperation often focused on military assistance, today’s engagement seeks to build indigenous maritime capacity through technology sharing, training, and institutional support.

This shift is further demonstrated by the Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME) initiative in Dar es Salaam in 2025. AIKEYME is envisioned as a multinational maritime exercise involving African littoral states to enhance interoperability, HADR, maritime domain awareness and collective response to non-traditional security threats (Indian Navy, 2025). Its significance lies not only in the naval exercises, but in the broader political message that India seeks to partner with African partners to enhance regional maritime governance, rather than project unilateral influence. Such cooperative approaches are increasingly argued by scholars of Indian Ocean security to be more sustainable than externally driven security arrangements as they reinforce local ownership and institutional capacity (Brewster, 2018; Bueger & Edmunds, 2024). Another area of increasing cooperation has been Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). The focus of modern maritime governance has shifted to the ability to monitor vessel movements, detect illicit maritime activities and share information. The sharing of information is today one of the most important determinants of effective maritime security and often outranks traditional naval capabilities in operational significance (Bueger and Edmunds 2024). Through the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) and its expanding network of White Shipping Agreements, India can partner with Tanzania in areas like coastal surveillance, maritime traffic monitoring and search-and-rescue coordination. Much of this cooperation is at a nascent stage, but its significance in the long term is that it is reinforcing regional maritime governance, rather than just enhancing bilateral defence ties.

The Blue Economy has given a new dimension to maritime cooperation. The African Union’s 2050 Africa’s Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS 2050) and the Lomé Charter stress that Africa’s maritime domain should be seen not only as a security space but also as a source of sustainable economic development through fisheries, offshore energy, marine biotechnology, tourism and maritime transport (African Union, 2014; African Union, 2016). Tanzania has also recognised the Blue Economy as a strategic priority, especially in Zanzibar where marine tourism, fisheries and port development are essential to local livelihoods. India’s increasing know-how in coastal infrastructure, port management, renewable energy and marine science opens avenues for cooperation that extend beyond traditional naval engagement. As

Brewster (2018) notes, the developing establishment of maritime partnerships in the Indian Ocean is being driven as much by economic connectivity as it is by military considerations.

At the same time, the western Indian Ocean has become a crowded geopolitical space. China has increased its naval presence and commercial investments in East Africa, the United Arab Emirates has bolstered its port and logistics networks, and European powers, Japan and the United States continue to maintain a strong maritime presence. Tanzania's foreign policy has typically shunned exclusive security alignments, preferring diversified partnerships that maintain strategic autonomy. This diplomatic approach, while posing constraints for India, also offers opportunities. Political goodwill is no longer enough to carry influence as it was in previous decades. India's maritime engagement must increasingly compete on the basis of institutional credibility, implementation capacity and long-term developmental value rather than geopolitical rhetoric.

Taken together, maritime cooperation between India and Tanzania represents a broader transformation in bilateral relations. The sea is no longer merely a geographical link between two historic partners, but has become the main strategic space where their common economic, security and political interests increasingly converge. With maritime competition heating up across the western Indian Ocean, the depth and resilience of this partnership will not be measured by symbolic naval engagements but rather by the ability of both countries to build durable institutions that can underpin maritime governance, regional connectivity and sustainable economic development.

6. Reconsidering the Strategic Partnership: Structural Limits and New Directions

The elevation of India–Tanzania relations to a Strategic Partnership in 2023 definitely heralded a new phase in bilateral engagement. Strategic alliances, however, are not defined by political declarations alone, but by their ability to produce lasting institutional, economic and strategic outcomes. The India-Tanzania relationship, despite high levels of political trust and increasing diversification of cooperation, continues to be hampered by structural constraints that could limit its long-term potential, unless addressed through sustained policy attention. The problems stem from shifting geopolitical circumstances, changing development needs, and growing rivalry in the western Indian Ocean, not from diplomatic differences.

The most challenging aspect is perhaps the changing geopolitical environment in East Africa. India's relationship with Tanzania in the initial decades of their bilateral engagement took place in a relatively less crowded strategic space. But today Tanzania is simultaneously dealing with China, the European Union, the United States, Japan, South Korea, Türkiye, the Gulf states and several multilateral development institutions. This diversification is a reflection of Tanzania's long-standing foreign policy preference of maintaining strategic autonomy rather than exclusive alignment to any external power (Alden & Large, 2019). India can no longer afford to rely on past goodwill or political affinity. Its comparative advantage increasingly depends on how well it implements projects, the competitiveness of its private sector and the credibility of its long-term development partnerships. The growing economic footprint of China is a manifestation of this changing environment. Since the early 2000s, Chinese investment in infrastructure, transport and industrial development has transformed the economic landscape of East Africa. More broadly,

under Belt and Road-related cooperation, Tanzania has benefited from Chinese financing in transport infrastructure, roads, ports and industrial parks, although not all proposed projects have developed as initially planned (Brautigam, 2020; Corkin, 2013). The growing role of Gulf states in logistics, ports and energy, and the growing engagement of Turkey and the European Union, are further signs that Tanzania today has a wider range of external partnerships than at any other time in its post-independence history. These developments are not to be interpreted in the crude context of geopolitical competition, but rather seen as indicators of Tanzania's growing external diversification. For India, this means that future influence will depend on the quality and implementation of cooperation, and not on historical ties alone.

The second challenge concerns the economic structure of bilateral relations. Trade has increased steadily, but it is still concentrated in a relatively narrow range of commodities. Indian exports still consist of petroleum products, pharmaceuticals, machinery and manufactured goods. Imports are still dominated by gold, pulses, timber, cashew nuts and mineral resources (Department of Commerce, 2025).

Such trade patterns provide commercial opportunities but at the same time make bilateral trade sensitive to fluctuations in international commodity markets. Scholars on India-Africa trade have long argued that sustainable economic partnerships need more diversification into manufacturing, technology-intensive sectors and value-added production rather than continued dependence on primary commodity exchange (Broadman, 2007; Taylor, 2012). Development Vision 2025, Tanzania's ambition of increasing domestic industrialisation, provides opportunities in this respect, but achieving this will require stronger industrial partnerships, technology transfer and investment in manufacturing value chains.

Another area that calls for careful attention is project implementation. India's model of development cooperation has generally been well received for its focus on demand-driven assistance, capacity building and concessional financing. However, a number of studies have highlighted that some of the Indian-funded projects in Africa have experienced delays in their implementation, especially those funded through concessional Lines of Credit (Mawdsley, 2018; Price, 2016). Often, such delays are not caused by political disagreements, but by complex procurement procedures, administrative bottlenecks, financing arrangements and capacity constraints on both sides. The implementation efficiency has become an important factor determining the credibility in a competitive development environment. The ability to deliver on time will therefore probably be as important as announcing new initiatives.

The growing strategic importance of the western Indian Ocean is also adding new complexities to bilateral relations. Although maritime cooperation has grown significantly, the regional security environment has become more and more dynamic. The risk of piracy, illegal fishing, maritime trafficking, geopolitics in the Red Sea and competition over maritime infrastructure all indicate the importance of ongoing maritime governance (Bueger 2015; Till 2018). Tanzania's maritime agenda remains focused on securing its Exclusive Economic Zone, strengthening coastal surveillance and promoting the Blue Economy. Many of these priorities are in line with India's maritime initiatives – SAGAR, AIKEYME and cooperation in Maritime Domain Awareness. But sustaining this convergence will need ongoing investment in institutional cooperation, technological capabilities and regional information-sharing mechanisms, not simply periodic naval engagement. The other challenge that is emerging is technological change. Recent bilateral initiatives

on digital governance, higher education, and critical minerals show great promise, but these sectors are evolving quickly and are increasingly shaped by global technological competition. Digital cooperation needs compatible regulations, cybersecurity standards, data governance arrangements and investment in digital infrastructure. Also, collaboration in critical minerals must strike a balance between commercial interests and environmental sustainability, community engagement and domestic value addition. International experience shows that resource-based partnerships can bring long-term development dividends only when coupled with institutional strengthening and industrial upgrading, rather than focusing on raw material exports alone (World Bank, 2020; African Development Bank, 2024).

These constraints should not be seen as weaknesses of India–Tanzania relations. Rather, they reflect the larger realities of international partnerships in the twenty-first century, where political goodwill must be matched by institutional capacity, implementation efficiency, and sustained economic engagement. The Strategic Partnership has provided an important framework for addressing these issues. Whether it is able to do so will ultimately determine whether India and Tanzania can move from a relationship based largely on historical affinity to one characterised by durable strategic interdependence.

7. Conclusion

Over the last seven decades, India-Tanzania relations have gone a long way. What started as an anti-colonial solidarity partnership, the Non-Aligned Movement and South-South cooperation has gradually become a multidimensional strategic relationship including diplomacy, trade, development cooperation, maritime security, education and technological cooperation. This is not only about the growth of bilateral engagement but about wider changes in the international system where emerging powers are increasingly looking for partnerships that combine economic, political and strategic objectives rather than relying solely on ideological closeness. The paper has argued that the importance of India–Tanzania relations lies in precisely this transformation. Most existing scholarship has focused on India’s Africa policy either in terms of the continent or against other external powers. Such perspectives, while useful, risk missing the dynamics of individual bilateral relationships that are increasingly defining India’s engagement with Africa. Tanzania is an important example of how a historical trust can evolve into a strategic convergence without abandoning the principles that originally defined the partnership. The elevation of bilateral ties to a Strategic Partnership in 2023 should therefore be seen not as an isolated diplomatic event, but as the institutional culmination of a longer process whereby both countries have adapted their relationship to changing geopolitical and economic realities. The analysis also reveals that the sources of bilateral cooperation are much more diverse than in previous decades. Political dialogue remains the bedrock of the relationship but contemporary engagement is increasingly driven by maritime security, regional connectivity, digital transformation, higher education, health care, renewable energy and institutional capacity building. These sectors are a reflection of broader shifts in India’s external engagement and Tanzania’s development priorities. They also suggest that future cooperation will be less about symbolic diplomacy and more about the ability of both governments to translate political commitments into persistent institutional cooperation and measurable developmental results.

The western Indian Ocean has a special significance in the evolving partnership. As the world turns its focus to resilient supply chains, maritime security and strategic connectivity, Tanzania's geographic location has gained renewed relevance in India's broader regional outlook. Maritime cooperation is therefore not limited to naval interactions or defence dialogue but increasingly includes maritime governance, the Blue Economy, coastal resilience, information-sharing and the protection of critical sea lines of communication. In this sense, India-Tanzania relations reflect the larger transformation of the Indian Ocean from a space of commerce to a major arena of twenty-first century geopolitics. At the same time, the partnership is moving into a more competitive international environment. Tanzania today has diversified relations with a range of external actors, and India's own Africa policy is being framed against the backdrop of increasing engagement from China, Gulf states, the European Union, and other emerging partners. In such a scenario, the durability of India's partnership with Tanzania will rely less on the historical goodwill than on the quality, reliability and long-term impact of its engagement. Increasingly, efficient implementation of development projects, greater private sector participation, stronger research collaboration, and more technological cooperation will probably be important determinants of bilateral success. Overall, the India-Tanzania relationship is emblematic of a broader shift in India's engagement with Africa – from a policy that was largely based on post-colonial solidarity to one that is increasingly based on strategic partnership, institutional cooperation and common regional interests. It does not lessen the importance of historical ties but it shows how durable political trust can serve as the basis for new forms of cooperation that are suitable to a quickly changing international order. As the two countries address an increasingly multipolar world, their partnership provides a model for how historical affinity and modern strategic interests can be complementary rather than competitive. The task for the next decade will be not to redefine the relationship, but to deepen and operationalise it in ways that deliver tangible benefits to both societies while contributing to stability, connectivity and sustainable development across the western Indian Ocean.

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