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Digging Deep, Rising Higher: India's New Critical Mineral Alliances in Africa

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The recent visit of India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, to Ghana and Namibia represents a diplomatic outreach and an extension of India's National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM), shaping its global economic strategy. These visits are not just a symbolic gesture, but a sign of India's intention to expand its presence in the African region, which has long been dominated by China and is increasingly contested by the United States (US) lately. China's near-monopoly on rare earth processing and its position in the global supply chain make it an existential necessity for India to expand its critical mineral partnership. With nearly 100 per cent import dependence on cobalt, nickel, and lithium, India's search for resource security can be met by building partnerships with African countries, which have vast and untapped reserves of critical minerals and strategic resources. This article examines the potential of India's critical mineral partnership with Ghana and Namibia, set against the backdrop of changing global supply chain dynamics. It analyses India's strategic interest in leading the Global South, focusing on its long-term development partnerships with Africa through bilateral agreements for critical minerals, including rare earth elements and uranium.

From Shared Histories to Strategic Partnerships

India has long claimed a special affinity with Africa, rooted in a shared anti-colonial history, ties forged through the Non-Aligned Movement, and a shared vision of a more equitable global order. In recent years, New Delhi has sought to transform that historical goodwill into concrete partnerships, driven by its booming economy (now among the world's largest) and pressing needs in energy, technology, and markets.¹ As Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently embarked on a five-nation tour, including Ghana and Namibia, with additional stops in Latin America, India's increasing engagements with these countries take place amid intense competition among major powers in Africa. India's pitch emphasises South-South solidarity, capacity-building and digital partnership – a contrast with the heavy infrastructure loans of China's Belt and Road and the transactional aid-for-trade of Western powers.²

Prime Minister Modi's Africa tour began in Ghana, where he became the first Indian premier in three decades to visit Accra. India and Ghana pledged to double bilateral trade within five years and inked a series of agreements covering defence, agriculture, health, culture, and digital payments. Modi announced that "Indian companies have invested nearly USD 2 billion in about 900 projects" in Ghana and set a target to double trade by 2030. He also offered to share India's experience with its Universal Payments Interface (UPI) system, saying, "*in the field of FinTech, India is ready to share its experience of UPI digital payments with Ghana.*" Among the four new Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) signed was a fintech pact to deepen cooperation in digital infrastructure. The leaders agreed to bolster defence cooperation (including training and equipment)

and to combat terrorism together. Notably, India backed Ghana's ambition to become a regional vaccine hub and reaffirmed support for African positions in global forums (Modi welcomed the African Union's new permanent seat at the G20).³ In a symbolic gesture, Ghana conferred on Modi the Officer of the Order of the Star of Ghana, underscoring the warmth of ties.⁴

In Namibia, Modi's agenda shifted to resource diplomacy. Namibia is Africa's largest uranium producer and home to vast reserves of lithium, copper, and rare earth elements. New Delhi sees Namibia as a key partner for securing critical minerals to support its EVs and clean energy initiatives. Indian exports to Namibia already surpass USD 400 million, and Indian Foreign Direct Investment in Namibia (in mining, manufacturing and diamonds) is roughly USD 800 million. PM Modi's talks with President Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah and an address to Namibia's Parliament (the first by an Indian PM in 27 years) focused on long-term supply agreements for uranium and other minerals. According to media reports, India is in discussions for uranium supply deals and joint mining ventures. It even aims to bypass the London/Antwerp trade hubs to import Namibian rough diamonds directly, thereby feeding India's gem industry. A tech MoU was also signed to enable cross-border UPI interoperability – part of India's digital diplomacy sweep. Namibia's government views Modi's visit as an opportunity to attract investment and bolster its global standing in the mineral value chain.⁵ Semafor reports that Indian officials consciously framed the trip as a South-South partnership, pushing back against any suggestion of "neo-colonialist" resource grabs. PM Modi emphasised that India "has historically stood with Africa" and is committed to investing in skills and technology with local communities. During the tour of Ghana and Namibia, specific outcomes were achieved, including MoUs focused on digital infrastructure, finance, and mining, as well as commitments to defence training and the establishment of high-level ministerial mechanisms. This tour highlighted India's message of mutual respect and a commitment to development partnership.⁶

India's Africa Model: A Different Kind of Partnership

Unlike the Chinese approach, which often hinges on large-scale infrastructure projects tied to sovereign debt, India's pitch to Africa is couched in the language of capacity-building, sustainable investment, and digital public infrastructure. Africa holds nearly 30 per cent of the world's critical mineral reserves. Yet for decades, its nations have mostly exported raw ore without developing domestic refining or value chains.⁷ India's model, if pursued with sincerity and scale, offers a corrective: joint ventures in processing, skill-sharing, digital governance, and local employment.

India's National Critical Minerals Mission (launched in early 2025)⁸ and the setting up of strategic hubs like its Dubai office for mineral acquisitions⁹ show that this isn't just about diplomacy; it's about building an industrial foundation. Ghana offers rare earth mining potential, Namibia has uranium and lithium, and Zambia has become a new frontier for copper and cobalt exploration.

Strategically, these alliances reduce India's over-dependence on China and give it new bargaining power in the clean-tech and defence sectors. They also strengthen its pitch as the voice of the Global South, a narrative PM Modi leaned into strongly during both his visits.¹⁰

To grasp the significance of India's moves, it is essential to understand the broader global landscape. China is Africa's largest economic partner, with trade reaching USD 282 billion in 2023 alone. It has financed massive rail, road, and port infrastructure under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), often in exchange for long-term access to critical resources.¹¹ However, concerns about debt distress, labour standards, and extractive business models have grown. A recent *Wall Street Journal* investigation noted how many African governments are pushing back against one-sided agreements, particularly as they seek to maximise the value of their mineral exports.¹²

The US, for its part, is trying to re-engage. President Joe Biden's October 2024 visit to Angola focused on launching the Lobito Corridor, a rail network to ship cobalt from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to global markets via Angola's ports. Through the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and new clean-tech partnerships, the US is gradually recalibrating its approach from aid to strategic investment; however, it still lacks a cohesive Africa strategy.¹³ India's offer stands out as more flexible, digitally forward, and framed as demand-driven. Its lines of credit are smaller, but grants and technical cooperation have fewer political strings. Many African countries view this as a more respectful and less transactional approach.

From Intent to Impact

PM Modi's outreach to Africa extended beyond critical minerals. It sought to establish India as a key player in shaping a multipolar world in the 21st century. His embrace of the African Union's G20 seat, support for United Nations (UN) reforms, and defence and digital diplomacy demonstrate a country ready to lead and not just talk and sign agreements. India's Africa strategy is still in motion. However, if it remains consistent, by investing in people, respecting sovereignty, and co-creating capacity, it can turn good intentions into lasting influence.

In the mineral-rich soil of Africa, India may yet find the foundations of its own strategic autonomy. India's foray into Africa is fast evolving from nostalgia to realpolitik. PM Modi's recent trips to Ghana and Namibia yielded both symbolic goodwill and practical agreements, ranging from trade and UPI to minerals and defence ties. India has made significant progress: bilateral trade has increased to USD 100 billion (as of FY 2023), and Indian corporations, along with small entrepreneurs, are actively engaged across the continent.¹⁴ Yet India still lags well behind China in sheer volume and deeply ingrained influence. In the future, New Delhi must leverage its *trump cards* – its robust MSME (Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises) sector, Information Technology (IT)

expertise, English-language affinity and diaspora linkages – to translate goodwill into growth. In addition, India should invest in local value addition (refineries, electronics assembly) and skills, so that Africa sees lasting development rather than mere extraction. It should also continue to champion African priorities on the world stage, such as pushing for debt relief, climate finance, and UN reforms, to strengthen its moral leadership among the Global South.¹⁵

But for India to succeed, intent must translate into impact. Three things are critical:

- 1. Invest in Value Chains, Not Just Resources:** Building refineries, battery plants, and training programs in Africa will benefit both sides. India should move beyond shipping raw minerals and focus on developing local capabilities.
- 2. Be Visible, Be Fast:** India's infrastructure projects often experience slow delivery and poor public relations. Africa's younger generation needs to see India as more than a sentimental friend—it must be seen as a results-driven partner.
- 3. Back it with Capital:** India may not outspend China, but it can out-innovate and build a greater trust. Combining the strengths of public sector entities, such as Indian Rare Earth Limited (IREL), National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC), and Khanij Bidesh India Limited (KABIL), with agile private investments and digital tools, like UPI and Aadhaar, is essential.

In essence, India is positioning itself as Africa's development partner of choice: one that shares historical solidarity, offers technology and expertise, and leaves behind colonial-era baggage. If it succeeds, India can become an indispensable part of a multipolar Africa, shaping the continent's supply chains and geopolitics in its next chapter. As Modi's visits made clear, the India-Africa partnership is poised to move from rhetoric to a results-oriented agenda; the question is whether both sides will sustain the momentum to turn opportunities into enduring progress.

NOTES:

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- ¹⁰ Ibid. Accessed on July 23, 2025.
- ¹¹ Vaidyanathan, "India, Africa and Critical Minerals." Accessed on July 18, 2025.
- ¹² Giulia Petroni, "Critical Minerals Supply Risks Mount Amid China's Grip, Export Curbs," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 2025. <https://www.wsj.com/finance/commodities-futures/critical-minerals-supply-risks-mount-amid-chinas-grip-export-curbs-f4b2f666>. Accessed on July 18, 2025.
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