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President Ram Nath Kovind to visit Africa on maiden trip abroad

BY [DIPANJAN ROY CHAUDHURY](#), ET BUREAU | UPDATED: SEP 28, 2017, 08.50 AM IST

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NEW DELHI: [Ram Nath Kovind](#) is scheduled to visit Djibouti and [Ethiopia](#) from October 3 on his maiden trip abroad as [President](#), a trip which assumes significance given India's efforts to expand its footprint in [Africa](#) at a time when Chinese presence is growing in the continent.

Djibouti, where China established its first naval base abroad, is critical for India, especially for its [Indian Ocean](#) strategy. Djibouti was the base for evacuation of Indian nationals and other nationals that the Indian government carried out from Yemen. Ethiopia, which has longstanding ties with India, will be a key element in Indo-Japan Asia Africa Growth Corridor that has a special focus on Eastern Africa and was launched on September 14 at the Indo-Japan annual summit.

Eastern Africa has a special place in India's Africa policy due to cultural and economic links, besides its location along the Indian Ocean where India wants to emerge as the net security provider, according to people familiar with the region. Developing blue economy in collaboration with African states in the Indian Ocean Region is also a priority for India, said one of the persons.

"In Africa, as in other parts of the world, China has an ability to deploy substantive capital and implement infrastructure projects expeditiously. For some of the African countries, which experience political instability, economic engagement with China comes with certain political advantages. On the other hand, India enjoys a different set of advantages with Africa," said Sanjay Pulipaka, an expert on Africa and consultant with ICRIER.

He further said, "Strong historical connections with some countries, English language, and the presence of diaspora constitute important pillars on which robust engagements can be constructed. India also has an ability to deploy capacity building activities that will in the long-run contribute to state-building in African countries."

Ethiopia has had links with India dating back 2,000 years and these continue till date. The country was once the hub of Indian businessmen and teachers in Eastern Africa and after lukewarm ties between 1974 and 1991, relations again picked up from 1991 at the end of Dreg rule. "Ethiopia greatly appreciates India's understanding of the problems of the countries of Africa, its support to their economic development and sensitivity to their needs... Ethiopia has received over \$1 billion in concessional credit from us which is more than any other country, save our neighbourhood," the external affairs ministry said in a note on India-Ethiopia ties.



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India's cooperation is also valued since India is seen as not interfering in internal affairs of the country, said an informed official, who quoted late Ethiopian PM Meles Zenawi as saying that India and China are Ethiopia's preferred partners. The current leadership under PM Hailemariam Desalegn looks at India as a strategic partner along with China, Japan and South Korea. Ethiopia has 5,000-6,000

people of Indian origin.

Since the opening up of the Ethiopian economy in the last decade, business ties between the two countries have increased significantly, especially in the area of infrastructure projects such as roads, power, telecommunications and water resources. India remained among the top three foreign investors in Ethiopia, with newer Indian multinationals marking their presence in Ethiopia. There are more than 540 Indian companies in Ethiopia with licensed investment of more than \$4 billion, according to the ministry's note. Bilateral trade in 2016 stood at \$1.37 billion, of which India's exports to Ethiopia were worth \$1.30 billion and imports amounted to \$68.4 million.

Djibouti may not grab headlines in India, but historical links, cultural affinities and people-to-people contacts between India and strategically located Djibouti existed long before Independence in 1947 and Djibouti's independence in 1977. The port of Adulis was the hub of maritime trade where Indian seafarers flocked to for trading in spices and silk for gold and ivory. Indian ships make regular calls at the Port of Djibouti on transit and for joint exercise with the US and French navies contributing to growing strategic partnership. To combat the menace of piracy in the Gulf of Aden and due to its strategic location in the Red Sea Indian naval ships make regular calls on the port of Djibouti.

While Indian investments in Djibouti are low currently Djibouti is keen to develop economic and development partnership with India. "Due to its strategic location as an important entry port and transshipment point for the region's landlocked countries, Indian companies could engage in infrastructure projects like road construction, port development, power transmission and transport," the external affairs ministry said in a note on India-Djibouti ties.

India may consider accelerating bilateral maritime cooperation, especially with the Djiboutian navy, given that Djibouti has become an important port for many countries and several other nations have set up bases, with China being the latest as part of its One Belt, One Road policy.

Africa is enjoying renewed focus of the Narendra Modi government and since the third Indo-African Summit in Delhi in 2015 which saw participation of more than 40 heads of states and governments from Africa, the Indian President, Vice President and PM have criss-crossed the continent over the past two years.

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