

Pakistan's Africa Engagement Policy: Implications and Way Forward to Improve Economic Opportunities

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Executive Summary

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Pakistan's foreign policy towards Africa is characterized by mutual respect, solidarity, and cooperation, rooted in historical ties and shared experiences of anti-colonial struggles. Despite cordial relations and various policy initiatives aimed at enhancing engagement, the trade volume between Pakistan and Africa remains relatively low. While initiatives like the "Look Africa Policy Initiative" and "Engage Africa Policy" have been introduced to boost trade and cooperation, implementation challenges and limited market information have hindered their effectiveness.

To overcome these challenges and maximize the benefits of cooperation, Pakistan should focus on sectors where it has comparative advantages and align its policies with the specific needs of African countries. Investment promotion campaigns, enhanced cultural exchanges, and a deeper understanding of African diversity are recommended to foster closer ties between Pakistan and Africa. Establishing monitoring and implementation mechanisms, such as an oversight body and dedicated cultural forum, can ensure the effective implementation of policy initiatives and facilitate sustainable cooperation.

By harnessing the potential of mutual cooperation and addressing implementation gaps, Pakistan and Africa can unlock new opportunities for trade, investment, and partnership, ultimately contributing to the socio-economic development and prosperity of both regions.

Recommendations:

Investment Promotion through Awareness: Launch targeted investment promotion campaigns to raise awareness about investment opportunities in Africa and facilitate matchmaking between Pakistani investors and African counterparts. Media campaigns and TDAP conferences should help people and businesses see Africa beyond hunger, poverty, health issues, and political turmoil.

Monitoring and Implementation Body: The Africa Cell at TDAP should be mandated to oversee the implementation of announced policies and initiatives. It should help Pakistani banks to open branches in Africa and vice versa. These initiatives should be properly documented as official policies of the state (Look Africa Policy Initiative and Engage Africa Policy do not have a textual document).

Pakistan Africa Cultural Forum: Besides the existing trading forums, an Af-Pak Cultural Forum should be established to facilitate people-to-people interactions, scholarships, training programs, and capacity-building initiatives.

Understanding African Diversity: The Africa desk at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should have at least five sub-heads based on sub-regions of Northern Africa, Central Africa, Western Africa, Southern Africa, and Eastern Africa. Representatives on these desks should be tasked with studying Africa in-depth and exploring more areas of cooperation.

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Problem Statement

Pakistan has had friendly relations with African countries and various initiatives are in place to enhance ties; despite Pakistan's concerted efforts to strengthen diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties with Africa, the trade volume between the two regions remains below its potential.

Overview of the Issue

Pakistan's foreign policy toward Africa is guided by mutual respect, solidarity and cooperation with the African nations. In the 1950s countries in the African continent were fighting the colonial powers for their independence. Pakistan, having gone through a similar experience, shared a natural bond with the African states. Pakistan allowed many African leaders to travel on Pakistan passports to advocate their cause on eminent international fora. Besides this, Pakistan has been part of most of the United Nations peacekeeping missions in Africa.

Pakistan and African states are part of many international platforms like the United Nations, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Commonwealth. African countries have a significant numerical presence in these bodies which might be of benefit for Pakistan. Pakistan has resident missions in over 20 African countries; it provided financial assistance to African countries in the 1970s, and recently Pakistan has shifted its focus to increasing trade with African countries.¹

Despite cordial relations with the countries in the African continent, the trade volume between Pakistan and Africa has not been noteworthy. In 2017, the Ministry of Commerce (MoC) gave its "Look Africa Policy" and in 2019, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) gave its "Africa Engagement Policy". Afterwards, there was an increase in the cultural, educational, and economic exchanges between Africa and Pakistan but the magnitude was still not huge.

¹ Tooba Urooj, "Reviewing Pakistan-Africa Ties in 2022," *The Diplomatic Insight* (blog), January 9, 2023, <https://thediplomaticinsight.com/reviewing-pakistan-africa-ties-in-2022/>.

Africa comprises 54 countries that are not largely industrialised; Pakistan too focuses on development and economic independence which paves the way for Pakistan to enhance relations with Africa. The countries in Africa are very diverse which requires focussing on the individual needs and interests of each country. In the face of such diversity a single document titled "Pakistan's Policy to Engage with Africa" may not be workable. While taking into account the diversity of political, economic, and cultural landscapes of Africa, Pakistan is required to harvest shared interests and engage with sub-regions within Africa; For instance, directing trade and investment to East Africa and security cooperation with North Africa. A flexible policy framework allows for adaptation and responsiveness to evolving circumstances in Africa.

Pakistan's Africa Engagement Policy

Pakistan has participated in diplomatic exchanges, regional forums, and high-level visits with African countries. The Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP) organizes trade missions, conferences and exhibitions to promote trade and investment ties and showcase Pakistani products. In the year 2022-23, Pakistan and Africa had trade worth 4.44 US billion dollars.² Ministry of Commerce organizes the Pakistan-Africa Trade Development Conference to foster business-to-business (B to B) linkages between governments, business leaders, and industry stakeholders.

Besides investment and trading ties, Pakistan and Africa have capacity-building programs, cultural and educational exchanges, and complementary infrastructure projects. Pakistan collaborates with African countries on security issues, including counterterrorism, peacekeeping, and maritime security. Pakistan provides humanitarian assistance to African countries affected by natural disasters, conflicts, and other emergencies. This includes offering relief supplies, medical assistance, and logistical support to alleviate humanitarian crises and support recovery efforts.

The above-mentioned initiatives reflect multifaceted engagement between Africa and Pakistan. Major policy initiatives that Pakistan undertook for Africa were the "Look Africa Policy Initiative" and "Engage Africa Policy". Look Africa Policy aimed at enhancing connectivity between Africa and Pakistan. Pakistan sought to negotiate preferential trade agreements with sub-regional organisations from western, eastern

² "Africa," accessed January 16, 2024, <https://mofa.gov.pk/africa>.

and southern Africa. The top ten economies of Africa—Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, Morocco, Senegal, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Tanzania, and Ethiopia—were prioritised under this policy initiative. These ten countries contribute 78 percent of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Africa.³ New commercial sections across Africa, Trade Forums within Pakistan, Joint Working Groups on trade, and the establishment of an Africa Cell in TDAP were the salient features of this initiative.

As part of the 2019 Engage Africa Policy, Pakistan opened five new diplomatic missions to Africa. Currently, Pakistan has over 20 trade and diplomatic missions in various parts of Africa. Besides this, trade wings were established in Africa, 26 honorary consuls and an Africa Fund was allocated. Engage Africa policy encouraged cultural exchanges and people-to-people cooperation between Africa and Pakistan. Pakistan is also actively engaged in regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the African Development Bank (AfDB).

In the fiscal year 2022-23, Pakistan's total trade with Africa amounted to US\$ 4.44 billion, comprising US\$ 2.89 billion in imports and US\$ 1.55 billion in exports. The primary export destinations include Kenya, South Africa, and Tanzania. Pakistan's major exportable items to African countries consist of rice, textiles and clothing, pharmaceuticals, cement, agricultural machinery, and paper. Conversely, Pakistan's main imports from African countries encompass coal, petroleum, diphosphorus, tea, cotton, and copper.⁴

Implications and Opportunities

Pakistan's policy initiatives toward Africa led to a slight increase in the trade output between the two parties. Pakistan Africa Trade Development Conferences, Envoys Conferences, Single Country Exhibitions, expos, and job fares were held. These trade missions and conferences explored favourable sectors for trade, mutual interests, and areas of cooperation. There was a 7 percent growth in Pakistan's trade with Africa amid Covid-19 challenges.⁵ New embassies were opened in various African countries.

³ "Look Africa Policy Initiative," Ministry of Commerce | Government of Pakistan, accessed January 16, 2024, <https://www.commerce.gov.pk/look-africa-policy/>.

⁴ "Africa."

⁵ Ambassador (retired) Tajammul Altaf, "Pakistan's Engage Africa Policy" (Institute of Policy Studies, February 3, 2022), <https://www.ips.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/07-Foreign-policy-Brief-9-Pakistan-Engage-Africa-Policy.pdf>.

PM Imran Khan met the Egyptian and Ethiopian presidents and AU parliamentary delegation visited Pakistan.

At the 2019 envoys' conference jointly hosted by MoC and MoFA, it was recommended that African leaders meet Pakistan's prime minister and Foreign Minister at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) meeting. An Africa-Pakistan ministerial level dialogue was envisaged, and high-level meetings between Pakistani's Chief of Army Staff and his African counterparts were foreseen for Munich Security Conferences. Initially, commercial sections from Europe were relocated to Africa. In 2020, Pakistan's delegation went to the first-ever Trade Development Conference between Africa and Pakistan. However, the above-mentioned policies and initiatives were not implemented to a greater extent.

Following the decision to open embassies in Africa, few embassies were upgraded to ambassadorial level and only one or two of the promised embassies were actually opened. Pakistan opened embassies in Djibouti and Ghana but the ambassadors have not been appointed, hence, they are not fully operational. In the last few years, ministerial visits between Africa and Pakistan have been minimal. Some meetings were held on the sidelines of the UNGA and OIC but the Pak-Africa dialogue and foreign ministers' meeting never took place. African and Pakistani military chiefs, too, did not have meetings at Munich Security Conferences.⁶

Africa's resource richness and promising GDP offer opportunities for Pakistan. Africa houses a population of 1.4 billion people, a 3 trillion dollar GDP, 25 percent of the natural global biodiversity, 30 percent of the world's mineral resources and a 4 percent growth rate.⁷ African Union (AU)—which comprises eight Regional Economic Communities—joining the G20 group would further expand the African market and pave the way for the effectiveness of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). Intra-African reduction in trade barriers and tariffs would allow Pakistan to compete with Africa's European and American trading partners.

⁶ Ambassador (ret'd) Tajammul Altaf, "Pakistan's Engage Africa Policy" (Institute of Policy Studies, February 3, 2022), <https://www.ips.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/07-Foreign-policy-Brief-9-Pakistan-Engage-Africa-Policy.pdf>.

⁷ U. N. Environment, "Our Work in Africa," UNEP - UN Environment Programme, October 25, 2017, <http://www.unep.org/regions/africa/our-work-africa>.

Pakistan and Africa generally experience opposite seasons due to their locations in different hemispheres. For example, when it is summer in Pakistan (typically from June to August), it is winter in many parts of Africa (also from June to August), and vice versa. This creates complementary agricultural cycles and trade opportunities in crops with specific growth requirements e.g. mangoes and oranges. Social and health hazards in the western part of Africa, and Sahel states create a chance for Pakistani pharmaceuticals, surgical tools, and nursing to capitalise (sector-specific agreements between businesses). Pakistan might require China's help to boost its trade and industry in Africa as China has established businesses all over the African continent.

Pakistan has a largely services-based economy which compliments the hoteling and hospitality industry in Africa. Northern and Eastern countries in Africa, e.g. Egypt and Mauritius, have a leading number of 5-star hotels. Pakistan's cotton and textile industry has enough opportunity to partner with these hotels to provide them with bedsheets and towels. Countries like Angola and South Sudan mostly export crude oil; Pakistan can maximise its refinery capacity by importing crude oil from these countries under free trade experiments. Pakistan also has the opportunity to export rice to Africa as rice is the staple food in most of the 54 African countries.

Despite cordial relations and opportunities to cooperate in multiple sectors, the geographical distance between Africa and Pakistan, logistical challenges and infrastructural deficiencies overpower the goodwill to boost trade and development. A trade volume of below 6 billion dollars amounts to limited market information and non-tariff barriers to trade which include customs procedures, regulatory restrictions, and lack of trade facilitation measures. Pakistan also faces a diversification challenge because of its reliance on a narrow range of traditional export products. Political and security concerns aside, low productivity and limited competitiveness of industries in Africa and Pakistan hamper their ability to compete in international markets and capitalise on trade opportunities.

Recommendations

By focusing on sectors where Pakistan has comparative advantages and African countries have specific needs, both parties can maximize the benefits of cooperation. Cotton, cereals (rice), IT, pharmaceuticals (tools and drugs), services/hospitality industry, and petroleum products are some complementary areas. Africa's potential should be harvested by understanding Africa's diversity and mining commonalities across countries and sub-regions. The above discussion leads to the conclusion that there is no dearth of goodwill and policy initiatives between Africa and Pakistan; it is the implementation of these policy initiatives that is required. Frequent high-level visits between leaders and ministers from both sides would highlight the importance of cooperation. The following recommendations are suggested:

Investment Promotion through Awareness: Launch targeted investment promotion campaigns to raise awareness about investment opportunities in Africa and facilitate matchmaking between Pakistani investors and African counterparts. Media campaigns and TDAP conferences should help people and businesses see Africa beyond hunger, poverty, health issues, and political turmoil.

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