

Beyond BRICS and Bats

South Africa-India Relations in a Changing World Order

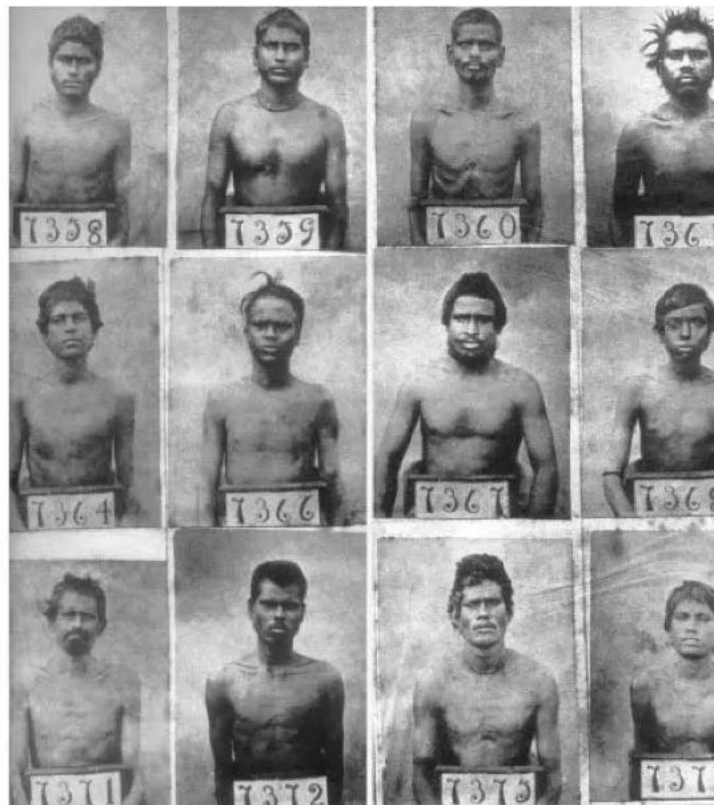
South Africa-India Relations

Built over Shared Struggles, Ideas and Possibilities

The Great March, Natal to the Transvaal, November 1913 · Wikimedia Commons · public domain

16 November 1860

342 Passengers on the Truro



Roster of arrivals/indentured labour in S. Africa who were identified by their numbers only
(Photo Courtesy: Book titled "From Cane Fields to Freedom")

South African History Online. (2016, November 9). List of passenger on the Truro, 16 November 1860. South African History Online. <https://sahistory.org.za/ref/A-0122270>

27 March 2026

List of 17 South Africans in IPL 2026

17 SOUTH AFRICA news24 Sport 2026 INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE	
 Tristan Stubbs David Miller Lungi Ngidi	 Marco Jansen
 Kagiso Rabada	 Kwena Maphaka Donovan Ferreira Lhuan-dre Pretorius Nandre Burger
 Aiden Markram Anrich Nortje Matthew Breetzke	 Dewald Brevis
 Ryan Rickelton Corbin Bosch Quinton de Kock	 Heinrich Klaasen

Key moments – People, Principles and States

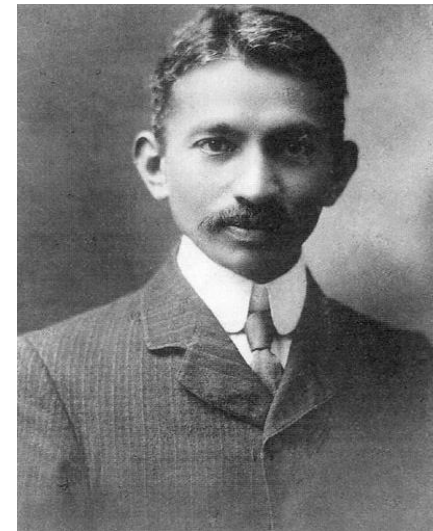
1860–1994

1860. The first indentured labourers land at Port Natal, recruited from Madras and Calcutta for the sugar estates. Today, about 1.5 million South Africans (2.5% of the population), descend from that migration and the traders who followed.

1893. A 24-year-old lawyer arrives in Durban on a one-year contract and stays for over two decades. Hones ideas of *Satyagraha* that underpins non-violent Indian Independence Movement.

1946. India becomes the first country to impose trade sanctions on South Africa, and takes the treatment of Indian South Africans to the very first session of the UNGA. Amb. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit makes the case and wins the vote — the beginning of apartheid's isolation.

1991–94. India extends recognition before constitutional settlement by hosting Proteas to international cricket in November 1991.



M.K. Gandhi, attorney, South Africa. Wikimedia Commons - public domain



Relationship post-Apartheid

Year	Milestone	Significance
1993–94	Diplomatic relations restored; Indian High Commission opens in Pretoria	A state-to-state relationship after 47 years of rupture
1997	Red Fort Declaration — Mandela and Deve Gowda	The first India–South Africa Strategic Partnership
2003	IBSA Dialogue Forum founded in Brasília	A coalition of Southern democracies, distinct from BRICS
2006	Tshwane Declaration — Mbeki and Manmohan Singh	Strategic partnership widened to defence, science, trade
2010–11	South Africa joins BRICS at China's invitation, with Indian support	Africa's seat in the principal non-Western grouping
2019	Three-Year Strategic Programme of Cooperation. President Ramaphosa served as Chief Guest at India's 70 th Republic Day Celebrations on 26 th Jan 2019.	The first structured joint work plan, plus visa simplification.
2026	India–SACU terms of reference for a Preferential Trade Agreement	The first credible attempt at a trade deal since talks collapsed in 2010



Cricket and reciprocity

One language that both countries converse in



Eden Gardens, 10 November 1991

Clive Rice leads South Africa out — SA's first international since 1970, played in India before apartheid had formally ended. @ESPNCricinfo



Wankhede Stadium, 2 April 2011

Gary Kirsten carried by the India squad — a South African coach delivering India's first World Cup in twenty-eight years. @Getty Images



Navi Mumbai, 2 Nov 2025

Harmanpreet Kaur and Laura Wolvaardt after the Women's World Cup final.

Providing what the other yearns for – Recognition, Belief and Respect.



Talk the Talk, but very little Walk

South Africa and India agree on almost anything that matters in World Politics

- **Diplomatically, a warm and intimate relationship**
 - Similar voting patterns at the United Nations – Palestine cause possibly being an exception.
 - Shared positions on Climate Finance, building synergies with broader G77 and China grouping.
 - Joint proposal for temporarily IPR waiver to WTO in response to Covid-19.
 - Part of IBSA, BRICS, G20, as well as BASIC, LMDC and G77+China in the UNFCCC Negotiations.
- **Commercially, a thin lightweight relation**
 - Very little trade between the two = USD11Bn (2019-20) to USD 19Bn (2023-34).
 - In 2025–26 India traded \$93.7 billion with Africa. The whole Southern African Customs Union — overwhelmingly South Africa — accounted for \$16.8 billion of it.



Where are we now

Convergences, balance sheets, and a Changing World

Significant convergences

1

Climate

Founder members of BASIC. Strong defenders of Common but Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR), Climate Finance before ambition, no Carbon Border Taxes.

2

Global South

IBSA, BRICS, G20, UN and IMF reform. Both insisting reform for benefit of Global South.

3

Medicines

HIV generics in 2001 (Doha Declaration on TRIPS agreement and Public Health); the TRIPS waiver of 2020. Both forced patents onto the agenda.

4

Trade rules

Defending policy space at the WTO: agriculture, food stockholding, a working appeals process.

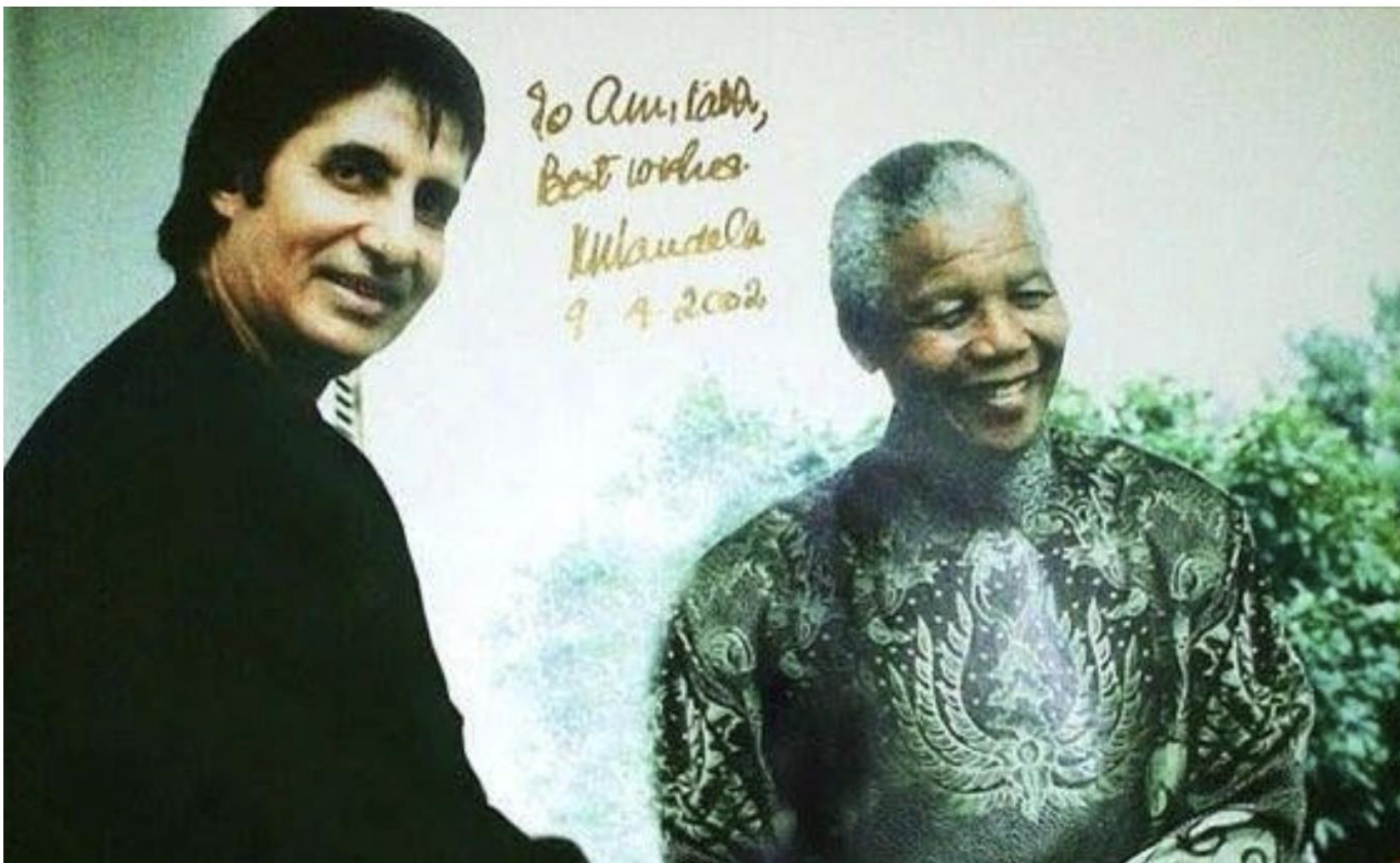




Amitabh Bachchan ✓

18 July 2018 · 🌐

FB 2071 - Nelson Mandela Day - on one occasion , he saw me across a street at a common event and waved to me and said -"I hope you remember me" !! amazing humility and grace .. He presented this picture to me, with a personalised autograph !



👍 10K

346 comments 847 shares

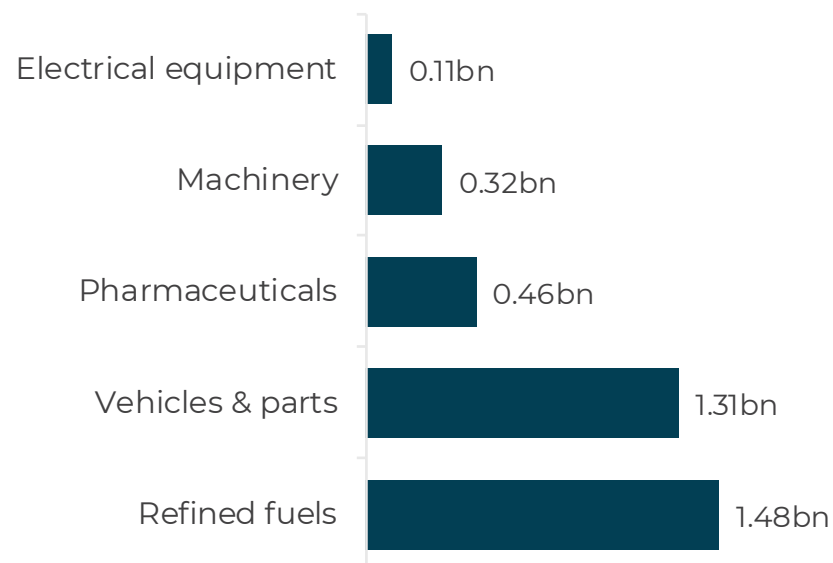


Indian film megastar Amitabh Bachchan was appointed by Nelson Mandela as a **46664 Special Ambassador** on December 1, 2004.

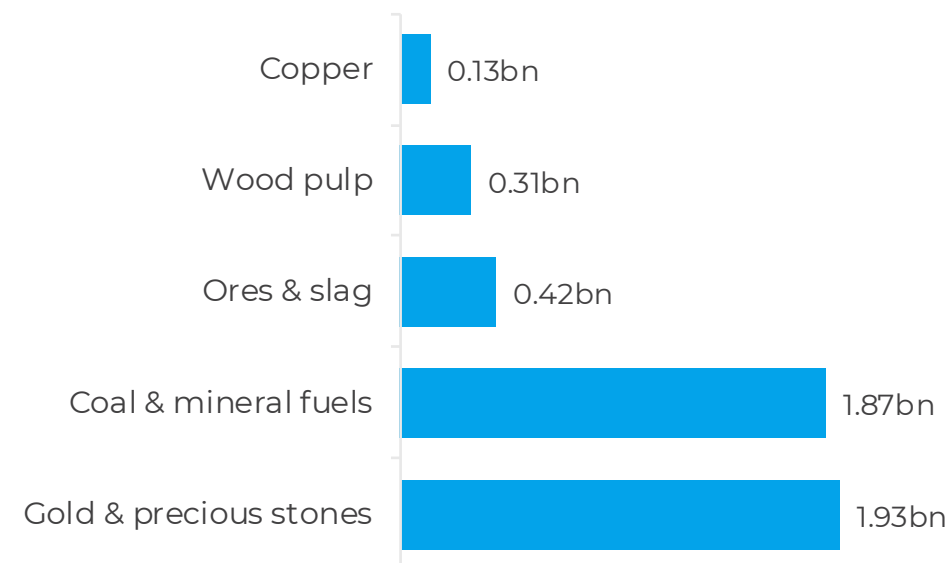
What we sell each other

Merchandise trade, April–November 2025 (US\$ billion)

India sells South Africa



South Africa sells India

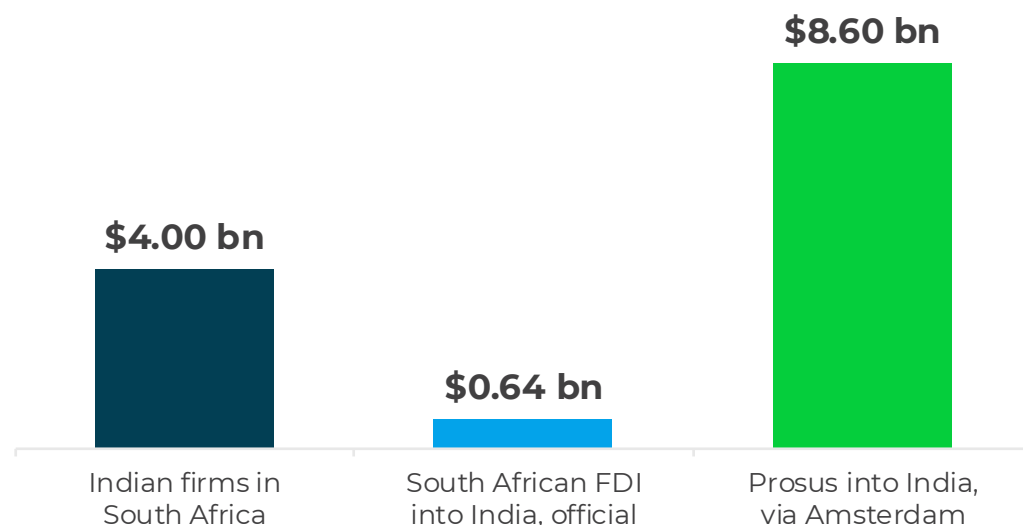


Source: India Ministry of Commerce data, FY2025–26 (April–November 2025).



Investments – direct and indirect

Direct investment between the two countries (US\$ billion)



Sources: DPIIT cumulative FDI equity inflows, April 2000 – September 2025; CII–PwC survey of Indian firms in South Africa; Prosus disclosures, 2025.

Accounted

- South Africa's official direct investment into India is \$0.64 billion since 2000 — 38th among source countries. Around 140 Indian companies operate in South Africa with roughly \$4 billion invested.

Unaccounted

- Prosus, the Naspers vehicle, has put \$8.6 billion into 35 Indian companies — Swiggy, Meesho, Rapido, Urban Company, PayU. It is booked through Amsterdam.
- ArcelorMittal South Africa, the old Iscor, is not registered as Indian either.



India

Building fast and growing

- 300 GW of non-fossil capacity crossed earlier this month — over sixty percent of the 500 GW target for 2030
- 54% of installed capacity now non-fossil; the halfway mark came five years early, primarily solar.
- Aim to achieve net zero by 2070, with electricity demand still climbing steeply
- Exporting policy as well as panels: the International Solar Alliance
- World's 2nd largest seaborne importer of coal. Single largest importer of South African Coal.

India's problem — adding clean capacity faster than demand grows.

South Africa

Dismantling and replacing

- \$13.7 billion pledged under the Just Energy Transition Partnership; the United States withdrew in February 2025
- Load shedding ended — 441 days clear by August 2026 — but on restored coal availability, not new build
- IRP 2024: 10 GW solar, 7.3 GW wind, 6 GW gas, 5.2 GW nuclear by 2039
- Net zero by 2050, with Mpumalanga's coal economy the binding constraint
- South Africa is one of the emerging destination for Indian Solar Photovoltaic (PV) Exports.

South Africa's problem — closing a coal fleet without closing a region.



The Geopolitical shocks of 2025-26

- Strained relationship with the United States of America under Trump 2.0.
- South Africa's G20 Presidency under attack from US.
- Supported by all other G20 member states to issue a Leaders Declaration. South Africa disinvented from US G20.
- India-Pakistan War – US warming up to Pakistan.
- In August 2025, the United States placed a 50% tariff on Indian goods — the highest on any major economy citing Russian oil purchases and India's BRICS membership; South Africa was hit with 30% tariff.
- **Raised questions about the predictability and stability of rules-based order.**
- On Sidelines of G20 Summits, **IBSA was revived** – last summit took place in 2011 in South Africa.
- Europe is increasing its defence expenditure – squeeze on development finance availability.
- Old hedging of aligning with the South and doing business with the North may not be feasible for long.



Future Trajectories

Business as Usual or From alignment to substance

Why the next three years are different

Costs of inaction has increased

- Diversification stopped being optional.

For thirty years, South–South trade agreements were a nice idea competing against a reliable Northern default. In current geopolitical context predictability attracts premium.

- The energy transition has turned from a nice idea to a means towards energy security

In context of South Africa- India, South Africa resources – other than coal are urgently coveted, including by India.

- India- SACU PTA

On 12 August 2026, India and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) signed terms of reference to negotiate a preferential trade agreement.

Challenge is to balance India's manufacturing interest against South Africa's industrial policy, and South Africa's agricultural interest against India's rural politics.

Difference: both sides now have a reason to accept a worse deal than they wanted, rather than no deal at all.



Where alignment could become substance

1

Trade

Turn the India–SACU terms of reference into a deal that survives contact with domestic industry.

2

Energy

Pair India's manufacturing scale with South Africa's platinum and its transition experience.

3

Minerals

Move from shipping ore to sharing processing — the hardest bargain of the five.

4

Health & digital

From the TRIPS waiver to real manufacturing capacity, and from India Stack to a shared public layer.



India brings

Scale, cost and manufacturing

- Module and cell manufacturing at a cost base no African producer can match alone
- Deployment experience: hundreds of gigawatts procured, financed and connected in a decade
- Green hydrogen and electrolyser ambitions that need platinum in volume
- The International Solar Alliance (ISA) as a vehicle for African deployment finance

India needs somewhere to industrialise beyond its own borders, and a partner that is not China.

South Africa brings

Metals, experience and Beneficiation

- Roughly 70% of world platinum output — the catalyst in PEM electrolyzers and fuel cells
- Manganese, chrome and vanadium, all of them battery and steel inputs
- Grid, regulatory and procurement institutions that are unusual in their sophistication for the continent
- The only serious live experiment in what a just transition costs a coal region politically

South Africa needs manufacturing partners who will build here rather than buy from here – Beneficiation at source.



The beneficiation bargain

The hardest conversation

- Trade composition: South Africa sends gold, coal, ores and pulp; India sends back fuel, vehicles and medicines. Every additional tonne of unprocessed ore makes that pattern deeper. A deal that only liberalises raw material flows would be a limited diplomatic success.
- Desirable: preferential access to platinum-group metals and manganese, priced and secured on long-term terms, in exchange for Indian investment in processing, component manufacture and skills inside South Africa. Trade market access to minerals for capacity.
- India's Commerce Minister indicated used in May 2026: move beyond raw material trade towards higher-value products, integrated supply chains and local manufacturing. How to realise this?

The digital layer

An opening not taken

In February 2026 six African countries — Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Lesotho — adopted India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) framework, gaining access to eighteen platforms through **India Stack Global**: Identity, Payments, Document storage, Health and Education systems.

South Africa is not among them. Lesotho, inside the SACU, got there first.

Meanwhile Modi and Ramaphosa named DPI and AI governance as priority areas at the G20 bilateral in November 2025.

Trajectory five — digital

Why it matters

Sovereignty, not software

The case:

- DPI is an alternative to buying a state's digital plumbing from American or Chinese platform companies — open-source, publicly owned, and designed for Global South.
- With South Africa's fiscal constraints and its payments and social-grant challenges, that proposition deserves a serious consideration.



Reforming the system, Rewriting the rules

The missing institutional layer

- Summitry has its limits, particularly when states are going through geopolitical upheaval.
- India BRICS Presidency will be cautious and play a balancing act – resisting common-currency and de-dollarization proposals, taking a reformist rather than revisionist approach. South Africa will be hosting BRICS in 2028, post Chinese Presidency and possibly in even more difficult geopolitical context.
- Possibility of common positions in near term:
 - Carbon border measures – already joint position from BRICS 2026 – a joint Indian–South African position on the WTO-compatibility of the EU's mechanism would be more effective.
 - Climate finance where COP32 provides avenue for South Africa to play important role in BASIC positions.
 - Critical minerals governance: where the rules and bilateral deals are being pursued on multiple fronts.
 - As producer and consumer, South Africa and India respectively are on opposite sides of the table. A mutually beneficial deal will go a long way in shifting from talk, talk to walking the talk.



Three futures, 2026–2035

	Drift	Transactional	Strategic
What happens	Preferential Trade Agreement talks stall again on autos and agriculture. Summitry continues. Trade grows with the economies, not faster.	A narrow PTA concludes. Tariff lines move. Indian firms expand sales and distribution in South Africa.	PTA plus a minerals-for-capacity framework, DPI adoption, and joint positions on carbon borders and climate finance.
Trade in 2035	Roughly \$25–30 billion — growth without transformation.	\$35–45 billion, with composition largely unchanged.	\$50 billion-plus, with South African exports shifting toward processed and manufactured goods.
What it needs	Business as Usual.	Political will on both sides for eighteen months of hard negotiation.	Political will, plus South Africa treating minerals as leverage rather than as revenue.
Likelihood	The historical base rate, and still the most probable single outcome.	Plausible. The terms of reference are signed and both sides need a win.	Unlikely without deliberate, sustained choice — which is what makes it worth arguing for.



What could stop this

Honest obstacles

- Domestic protection on both sides — Indian agriculture, South African manufacturing
- China: Everything, everywhere, all faster, larger and with cheaper
- Distance and thin logistics: limited direct air links, long shipping routes, high freight costs
- Policy uncertainty in South Africa on mining rights, electricity and local content
- Mutual under-attention — each is a mid-tier priority in the other's foreign ministry

Signs it is working

Observable indicators

- A concluded PTA text, however narrow, before the end of 2027
- An Indian manufacturing investment in South Africa above \$250 million in processing or components
- South Africa joining India Stack Global, or an equivalent DPI agreement
- An advance purchase commitment for Afrigen output from an African or Indian government
- A joint India–South Africa submission on carbon border measures at the WTO



Beyond BRICS and bats

Wrapping up

- Warmth, affection and trust resulting in reliability defines South Africa-India relations. Both share origin stories – uncommon in International Relations – A “Platonic relationship” in midst of interest driven geopolitically volatile context.
- Affection, based on history, sport, people and summitry, keeps the relationship warm, but only sporadically consequential.
- 2025-26 provided a dash of realism: Both countries learned that access to Northern markets is not a given, and that being right about the international order does not protect you from it.
- Challenge is to convert the argument for South–South cooperation into a case of Cooperation.
- Beyond friendship to partnership?

Thank you

