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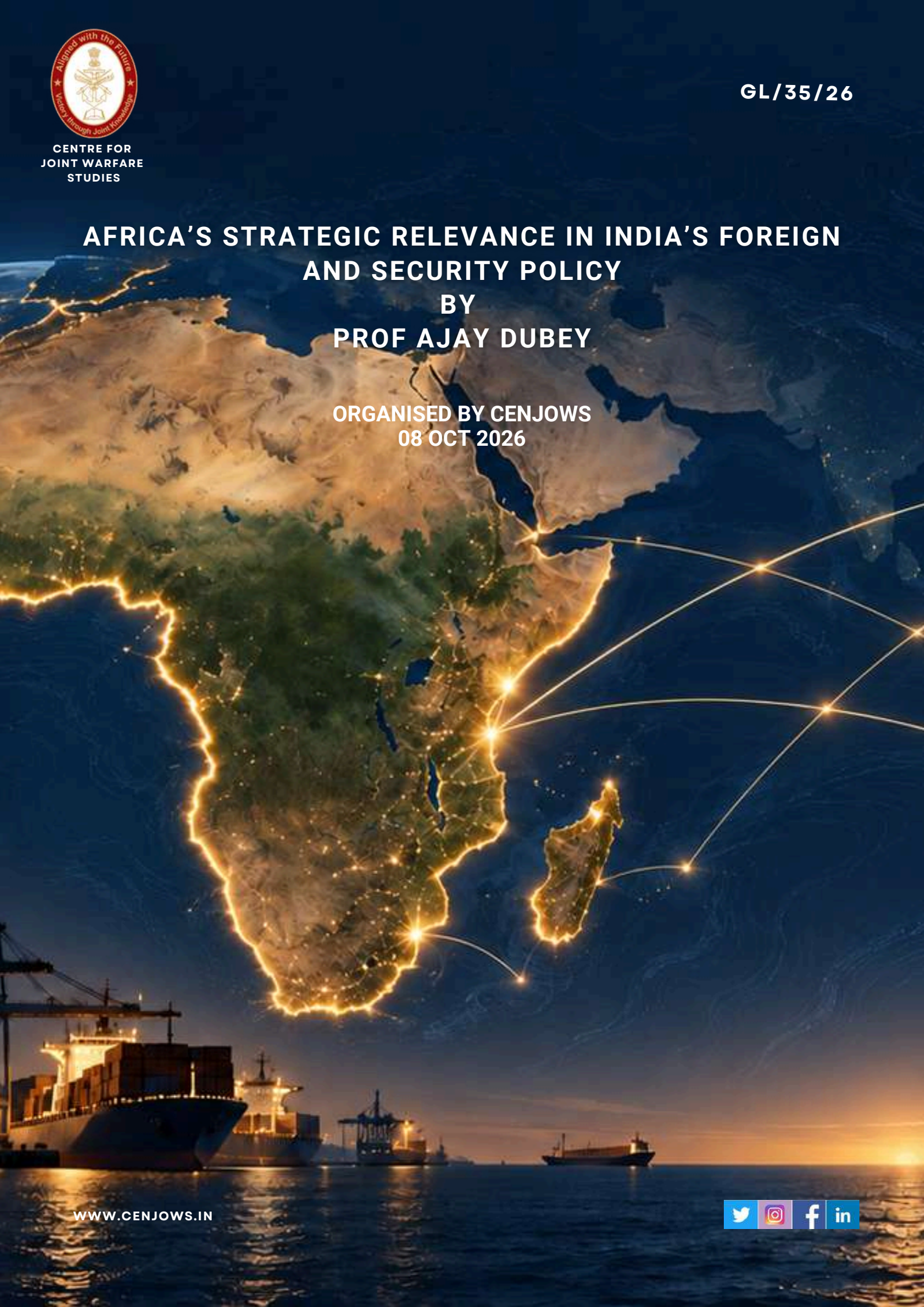
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AFRICA'S STRATEGIC RELEVANCE IN INDIA'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

BY

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ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
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INDIA-AFRICA RELATIONS: STRATEGIC RELEVANCE, CHALLENGES, AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

BY PROF AJAY DUBEY

ORGANISED BY CENJOWS ON 08 OCT 2026

The guest lecture delivered by Professor Ajay Dubey, an Africa scholar, on 8 October 2026 provided a comprehensive analysis of India-Africa relations, with particular emphasis on Africa's strategic relevance for India, the challenges constraining the present engagement, and the policy measures required to make the partnership more effective. The session brought together the CENJOWS hosts and researchers, along with several online participants who raised follow-up questions during the discussion.

The lecture began by highlighting Africa's importance as a resource-rich and strategically vital neighbour for India. Professor Ajay Dubey drew attention to the continent's location along key sea lanes that bear directly on India's commerce and security, its significant share of global mineral resources, estimated at around 20 per cent, and its substantial hydrocarbon reserves relevant to India's energy needs. He recalled India's historical support for African decolonisation and observed that the goodwill generated by it continues to shape contemporary diplomatic opportunities and expectations.

A central argument of the lecture was that India must treat Africa not as a single bloc but as a collection of 55 diverse countries, differing widely in colonial legacy, language, and economic structure. Professor Ajay Dubey cautioned that a one-size-fits-all approach undermines policy effectiveness and cited the example of the fourteen Francophone countries whose monetary and economic ties continue to limit their full independence, a reality that must inform the design of tailored engagement strategies.

Professor Ajay Dubey identified two primary Indian objectives in Africa. The first is political and diplomatic: strengthening ties with African states to amplify India's leadership of the Global South and to advance reform of global governance institutions, including the United Nations, where Africa's 55 votes carry considerable weight and African states have often supported India. The second relates to economic and security interests, particularly maritime security in the Indian Ocean and capacity-building cooperation with partner states. He referred to the SAGAR vision of security and growth for all in the region, noted that India already supplies defence equipment

and training, and stressed the need to expand intelligence-sharing and regional security cooperation in view of the instability in areas such as the Sahel and Sudan.

The lecture then examined India's economic engagement with the continent. Professor Ajay Dubey noted that since 2008 India has pivoted towards economic diplomacy, committing roughly 20 billion US dollars across three India-Africa summits, but observed that only about 60 per cent of this has been delivered, leaving a large share undisbursed. He attributed this shortfall to bureaucratic constraints, risk-averse procedures, and the design of financing programmes. He further observed that engagement is now led largely by the private sector, whose profit orientation can conflict with development objectives unless guided by policy, and recommended a blended public-private approach focused on investment, production, job creation, and industrialisation in Africa. He also noted that about 90 per cent of India-Africa trade is concentrated in roughly ten countries and a few commodities, such as hydrocarbons, minerals, and pharmaceuticals, underscoring the need to diversify both partners and products.

On the question of competition, Professor Ajay Dubey observed that China's trade, estimated at around 300 billion US dollars, and its investment footprint and speed of delivery far exceed India's, while Russia's operational capacity remains limited and Western actors face their own constraints. He argued, however, that India retains a distinct comparative advantage in people-centric capacity building, transparency, and soft power, as opposed to purely cash-driven models, and that China's approach carries social and employment drawbacks which India can address through more inclusive partnerships.

The speaker also discussed the role of the Indian diaspora and soft power. He noted the sizeable Indian-origin population in East Africa and in island states such as Mauritius as an important cultural and economic link, while pointing out that engagement remains underleveraged in the Francophone and Lusophone regions and that older diaspora communities require targeted outreach. He further argued that India lacks the sustained media and narrative presence in Africa that China maintains, which reduces its influence among younger Africans, and recommended strengthening India's media and narrative presence alongside diaspora networks.

Looking ahead, Professor Ajay Dubey proposed a series of institutional and process reforms. He urged that Africa policy should not remain centred on the Ministry of External Affairs and should instead involve business, academia, civil society, defence,

and diaspora stakeholders. He recommended moving away from rigid sovereign-guarantee and Indian-content requirements, such as the 75 per cent India inputs condition, towards flexible blended-finance models that African partners prefer, with priority given to value addition and industrialisation in African projects. These were presented as recommendations for follow-up rather than immediate commitments.

In conclusion, the lecture underscored that Africa is central to India's strategic and economic interests, but that the existing engagement remains constrained by implementation deficits, the centralisation of policy within the Ministry of External Affairs, and competition from better-resourced actors such as China. It highlighted the need for diversified, people-centric, and industrialisation-focused partnerships, supported by blended finance and multi-stakeholder participation, in order to convert India's historical goodwill into sustained influence and tangible outcomes.