Last month New Delhi hosted the Third India Africa Forum Summit (IAFS). It was the most outstanding diplomatic gathering in India since the Non-Alignment Summit of 1983 and the largest assembly of African leaders outside Africa and on Indian soil. 41 African heads of state attended the event and all 54 African countries sent high level delegations.

This was also the first India-Africa summit to be held under Mr Modi and the most important public occasion in which the Indian Prime Minister engaged with a large number Southern countries. In fact, since being elected, Mr Modi has been more preoccupied with courting the world's powerful nations than reaching out to other fellow-developing countries. An assessment of the IAFS may help charting continuities and changes in Indian attitudes, imperatives and ideological concerns towards Africa and, most importantly, to situate them within broader debates about the direction of India's foreign policy.

Prior to the IAFS there had been concerns that Africa had indeed been quietly dropped from New Delhi's foreign policy agenda. Last year, the Third IAFS was postponed to an unspecified date in 2015 due to the Ebola crisis. Equally the 11th edition of the CII India-Africa Conclave was also postponed. This is significant since it is there that deals worth of millions are signed between Indian government and businesses and their African counterparts. To The Economist this was a clumsy decision on the part of New Delhi, for, whilst in this period, India-Africa bilateral trade did not grow as predicted, China-Africa bilateral trade soared to US$210bn making China Africa's largest trading partner.

In effect, India is not in a position to neglect Africa. Africa is important for India's energy security, is a crucial source of key primary commodities, and is also a key trading partner for India. Moreover, Africa - with its 54 votes - can play a crucial role in supporting India's bid to a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council.
This larger and more spectacular than usual India-Africa summit can therefore be seen as an attempt at recalibrating India's foreign policy showing that India continues to care about its fellow developing countries. It also signalled New Delhi's intention to take Africa seriously and to regain lost ground. Considering that China's own Africa summit was held only a few weeks after the IAFS, some also believed that India's Africa Summit was a not-so-subtle attempt at stealing the show off China.

Prime Minister Modi's IAFS certainly gave new impetus to languishing India-Africa relations. This revamping of India-Africa links however should not be surprising. Whilst Modi's domestic track record has risen a number of concerns, his efforts in foreign policy have been widely regarded in a positive light. Although we cannot talk yet of the emergence of a Modi Doctrine, a consensus exists that the Indian Prime Minister has brought new dynamism to the ways in which India engages with the external world. It has not been just his clocking an impressive number of air-miles that has made the difference but also the shift in emphasis in how India's economic agenda is pursued (by promoting the Make in India campaign) and his tireless efforts in gaining international recognition. Significantly, it was India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who invested earnestly in putting India on the global map by carving a role for New Delhi as the leader of the post-colonial world. It has been precisely this Nehruvian legacy that has cemented India-Africa relations throughout the decades. Up to now, in the official and unofficial discourse about India-Africa links, Nehru and his principles of Afro-Asian solidarity have figured prominently.

At the IAFS however, Modi took considerable steps to distance himself as much as possible from his revered predecessor. In fact, the IAFS was Nehru-lit. Nehru was indeed conspicuous by his absence. A picture of Nehru with the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser appeared briefly during the Summit opening ceremony, but India's first Prime Minister was never mentioned in the any of the official literature released before and after the Summit. Singularly, in his speech, Mr Modi did not refer to Nehru and refrained from using terms dear to Nehruvism in describing India's relations with the South. Whilst on other occasions, he often talked of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam - a concept that many other Indian leaders had used before him - in describing India-Africa linkages, at the Summit, Mr Modi preferred to highlight Gandhi's role in cementing India-Africa relations rather than reverting back to the Nehruvian discourse of Southern solidarity. Instead of remembering Nerhu's old African friends, like Egypt's Nasser, Ghana's Nkrumah and Tanzania's Nyerere, he chose to praise some of Africa's nobel laureates from the most famous (such as Liberia's President Ellen Jonhson-Sirleaf and the late Nelson Mandela), to the less well-known ones, like the Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka, the South African anti-Apartheid activist Albert Luthuli and the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz.

Interestingly, this shift in register seemed to have caught a number of African leaders unawares. While a clearly well-briefed Senegalese President mentioned Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, the President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma referred to Nehru (and Indira) as 'visionary leaders' and other African leaders spoke of Nehru in glowing terms whilst addressing the Summit.

Modi's snubbing of Nehru should not be surprising. The fact that Mr Modi is not a Nehru fan is not a secret. Since being elected, the Indian Prime Minister has ostensibly stayed away from anything Nehruvian. As the historian Khilnani has suggested, if the arrival of Modi has brought with it a rewriting of the history of India, Nehru will not be a leading chapter anymore. On the contrary, Mahatma Gandhi and the 'iron man' Sardar Vallabhai Patel have become the new nationalist icons of Modi's India. But the legacy and memory of Jawaharlal Nehru is not just being erased, it is also highjacked. There are numerous examples, but think for instance of how the once-famous Nehru jacket is now called a Modi jacket (significantly Modi even had all the African heads of state wear a raw silk 'Modi jacket'-kurta ensemble at the official dinner last month); or even think of the ways in
which Modi's government appropriated Nehru's memory last year on the occasion of the celebration of Nehru's 125th birth anniversary. It was on that day that Modi launched one of his pet projects, the Swacch Bharat campaign.

Under Modi, the third IAFS has certainly reinvigorated India-Africa relations, recalibrating India's foreign policy. It is possible that in Modi's calculated neglect at the IAFS of the Nehruvian register of South-South rhetoric (so prominent in previous official India-Africa declarations) there's nothing more that a simple distaste for anything Nehruvian.

However these rhetorical changes may be more substantial both at the foreign and domestic policy level. First, this scenario may indeed be signalling a radical and irreversible departure from Nehru’s ethically informed foreign policy. Some commentators believe that India has indeed now turned a corner for good, shifting from Nehruvian idealism to realism and that economic and strategic interests are inexorably winning the battle over ideological consideration. Second, the erasure of Nehru's legacy in India-Africa relations may be also reflecting broader (and more troubling) developments at home.