

# This time for Africa: On sustained India-Japan cooperation in the region



Rajiv Bhatia

JUNE 01, 2017 00:02 IST

## Sustained India-Japan cooperation in Africa can match China's substantial outreach

India-Africa engagement is getting stronger with the active involvement of political and business leaders of both sides. This was reflected in deliberations at the annual [meeting of the African Development Bank \(AfDB\)](#) recently. The AfDB's decision to hold its meeting here in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, demonstrated its confidence in recent achievements and future prospects of the Indian economy. It also confirmed Africa's growing interest in connecting more

extensively with India Inc. AfDB president Akinwumi Adesina called India “a developing beacon for the rest of the world”, adding that the time was right for India and Africa to forge “winning partnerships”.

ALSO  
READ



An Abe-  
Modi plan  
for Africa

This conference came against the backdrop of the historic third India-Africa Forum Summit in October 2015 when all 54 African nations had sent their representatives, 41 of them at the level of head of state or government. African governments have also been appreciative of Indian leaders’ unprecedented readiness to visit Africa. In the past two years, the President, the Vice President and the Prime Minister have

visited 16 African countries in the east, west, north and south. “After assuming office in 2014, I have made Africa a top priority for India’s foreign and economic policy,” Mr. Modi said at the AfDB meet.

## A growth corridor

What attracted the attention of media, diplomatic and strategic communities was the release by Mr. Modi of a vision document on the “Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC)”. This study was jointly produced by three research institutions of India and Japan — Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi; the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), Jakarta, and the Institute of Developing Economies Japan External Trade Organisation (IDE-JETRO), Japan — in consultation with other Asian and African think tanks. It envisages closer engagement between India and Africa for “sustainable and innovative development”, and will be anchored to four pillars: development and cooperation projects; quality infrastructure and institutional connectivity; enhancing capacities and skills; and people-to-people partnership. The AAGC will accord priority to development projects in health and pharmaceuticals, agriculture and agro-processing, disaster management, and skill enhancement. It will have special focus on the following geographies: Africa, India and South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia and Oceania. This study indicates a

preference for turning the 21st century into an Asian-African century, and not just an Asian century.

ALSO  
READ



India aims to boost trade ties with African nations

The idea of a growth corridor linking Asia and Africa stemmed from discussions between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Mr. Modi in November 2016, in light of talks between the two governments in earlier years. Convinced of the rising importance of the Indo-Pacific region as “the key driver for prosperity of the world”, the two leaders decided “to seek synergy” between India’s Act East Policy and

Japan’s “Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure”. This synergy would be reflected in better regional integration, improved connectivity and industrial networks. The strategy encompasses India-Japan collaboration for accelerating development in Africa together with other like-minded countries such as the United States, Germany, France and probably the United Arab Emirates and Singapore.

## Differences in approach

The very mention of the AAGC excited many observers. A few in the media asked experts whether this would be India’s answer to China’s One Belt One Road. The honest answer is in the negative as the approaches of India and China towards Africa are essentially different. China concentrates on infrastructure and cheque-book diplomacy, whereas India promotes a broader spectrum of cooperation projects and programmes focussed on the development of Africa’s human resources. China goes solo, while India is desirous of working with other willing nations to assist Africa as per the latter’s priorities. Besides, while committed to a voluntary partnership with Africa, India is not “prescriptive”, as Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley explained. This enlightened approach offers “limitless possibilities” for India-Africa cooperation.

Nevertheless, it should be reckoned that India and Japan do not have the luxury of time in view of China’s rapidly expanding footprint in Africa. An urgent need exists for them to increase the scope of their development projects, create synergy among themselves, engage

proactively with other willing partners, and thus turn the concept of the AAGC into a viable reality.

The authors of the vision document plan to produce within a year “an AAGC Vision Study” based on a geographical simulation model which will estimate the economic impact of various trade and transportation facilitation measures. The three institutions will then recommend the way forward to deepening the Asia-Africa partnership.

If New Delhi and Tokyo are anxious to make a difference, the most important task for them is to immediately initiate a few joint pilot projects involving the companies of India, Japan and a few African countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia and Mozambique in identified areas such as health care, agriculture and blue economy. Unless results become visible in the short term, questions may arise about the credibility of their joint approach. China’s substantial success needs to be matched by sustained India-Japan cooperation in Africa.

*Rajiv Bhatia is Distinguished Fellow, Gateway House, and a former High Commissioner to South Africa and Kenya*