

# India's New Initiative in Africa: The Asia–Africa Growth Corridor

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During the recent annual meeting of the Africa Development Bank at Gandhinagar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the launch of India's latest initiative in Africa, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), in partnership with Japan. This initiative is the latest in a series of steps taken by India including the Third India Africa Forum Summit and a number of high level visits to 16 African countries over the last two years, all aimed to boost ties with the continent. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor highlights the growing importance of Africa in Indian foreign policy and also signals India's willingness to partner with like-minded countries, such as Japan, in this region.

## India in Africa

The African Development Bank meeting in Gandhinagar has shifted the spotlight back to India's relations with the 54 countries in Africa. India's historical ties with this region are well known. Economic engagement with African countries has increased in the last two decades with a large number of public and private sector companies from India investing in Africa. Trade has seen a five-fold increase from USD 11.9 billion in 2005-2006 to 56.7 billion in 2015-16.<sup>1</sup> India engages with African countries at three levels: bilateral, regional and multilateral. Multilateral engagement was launched with the first India Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) in 2008. The third IAFS hosted by the Indian government in 2015 revealed the agenda that would help to empower Africans and bring Africa and India closer in the future. During the summit, India pledged USD 10 billion in concessional lines of credit to African countries.

India's engagement with the continent is consultative and is, to a large extent, driven by the demands of the African countries. Further, India postulates that its partnership is an amalgam of African development priorities in keeping with the African Union's long term plan and the Africa Agenda 2063, as well as India's development objectives. There is no doubt that India's engagement is highly appreciated by Africans. As Akinwumi Adesina, President of the African Development Bank, noted, "This cooperation is both a mutual privilege and priority" and that it is a "pleasure to partner with such an inveterate and committed investor in Africa."<sup>2</sup>

## Japan in Africa

Japan also has a long standing relationship with African countries. The main feature of Japan's Africa policy is its support for African "ownership". The most important Japanese initiative in Africa is the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), which was set up in 1993 to promote Africa's development and security through multilateral cooperation.<sup>3</sup> To some extent, TICAD refocused the world's attention on Africa. It was launched at a time when, following the end of the Cold War, Western donors had reduced their economic assistance to Africa and did not consider the region to be strategically important. It is important to note that this forum meets every five years in partnership with the United Nations Office of Special Adviser on Africa, the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank and the African Union Commission. At the last TICAD summit, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pledged USD 30 billion in the form of public and private sector investments in Africa.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in recent years, both Japan and India have been engaging with African countries. To some extent, this engagement may be driven by efforts to garner support from the 54 African countries for their candidacy in a reformed United Nations Security Council (UNSC). India and Japan are part of the G4 initiative along with Germany and Brazil seeking an early implementation of UNSC reforms. It is interesting to note that both India and Japan are speaking the same language and calling for "African empowerment" or "African ownership." The main difference is that, unlike Japan, India has not invited any multilateral agency to be part of the IAFS process. This does not, however, imply that India is not open to triangular cooperation with African partners. India and the United States are collaborating with African countries for promoting agricultural growth, energy security, health, women's empowerment and peacekeeping training.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, India has been open to working together with Japan in Africa.

### **Asia–Africa Growth Corridor**

India and Japan institutionalised a dialogue on Africa in 2010.<sup>6</sup> Since then, they have been exploring the possibilities of cooperation in Africa's socio- economic development. However, it was only during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Japan in November 2016 that the idea of the two countries promoting a growth corridor between Asia and Africa was crystallised.<sup>7</sup>

During the Africa Development Bank meeting, India unveiled the Vision Document of the Asian Africa Growth Corridor.<sup>8</sup> The vision document was prepared jointly by Indian and Japanese think tanks, i.e. Research and Information Systems for Developing Countries (RIS), Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), and Institute for Development Economics – Japan External Trade Organisation (IDE-JETRO), in consultation with other think tanks in Asia and Africa.

The main objective of the corridor is to enhance growth and connectivity between Asia and Africa. The corridor will focus on four areas: Development Cooperation Projects, Quality Infrastructure and Institutional Connectivity, Enhancing Skills, and People-to-People Partnership. Agriculture, health, technology, and disaster management have been identified as the main areas of development cooperation. According to the vision document, AAGC will focus on enhancing skills and research and development capacities in Africa. It will also strive to develop institutional, industrial and transport infrastructure in the Asia -Africa region. The corridor will facilitate greater people-to-people exchanges amongst the participating countries.

Even as it has launched the AAGC initiative, India has made it clear that it is not interested in joining China's Belt and Road Initiative, which is seeking to revive the global economy

through a 21st century silk road that traverses through Europe, Asia and Africa. Its refusal to participate in the Chinese initiative is due to concerns about sovereignty given that the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a part of the Belt and Road, passes through Indian territory under Pakistan's control. There is no doubt that comparisons will be made regarding the merits of the Indo-Japanese and Chinese initiatives.

Be that as it may, the AAGC marries India's brand of human resources development and capacity building with Japan's objective of delivering quality infrastructure in the region. Moreover, both India and Japan have consulted with think tanks in Africa and Asia while conceptualising this plan. Efforts should be made to fast track the next steps to turn these innovative ideas to reality.

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