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India and Japan's Strategic Opportunity in Africa: The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor Initiative

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Abstract

A collaborative economic corridor connecting Japan and India, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) aims to promote socioeconomic growth throughout Asia and Africa. This project will connect Indian ports to Southeast Asia and Africa. 54 African countries, 11 Southeast Asian countries, 8 South Asian countries, and 14 Oceania countries are all included in the corridor. India and Japan hope to grow industries including health, manufacturing, connectivity, infrastructure, and research institutes under this program. This study examines the AAGC effort with a focus on China's expanding influence in Africa and the Indo-Pacific area. Reducing China's growing influence in Africa is the main goal of building this corridor. The study also looks at the difficulties this project faces and emphasises the importance of Japan and India in the African environment.

Introduction

Through industrial networks and capacity building, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), a major cooperative endeavour between Japan and India, aims to promote economic development between Asia and Africa.¹ With active cooperation from the African Development Bank and numerous African countries, including South Africa, India and Japan developed the strategy under the AAGC project. By linking the economy of nations in Oceania, Africa, South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, it hopes to create a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and rediscover "ancient maritime routes" while also establishing new marine corridors.²

A maritime corridor that links ports in India and other Asian countries with ports in Africa would be a crucial part of the AAGC. Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, Mozambique, South Africa, and three West African countries—Ghana, The Gambia, and Côte d'Ivoire—as well as Western Indian Ocean island nations—Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar, and Comoros—will be the project's initial focus for India-Japan cooperation. This project's main goal is to focus on the needs of the African people rather than only highlighting trade and economic links. The development of this corridor is being done for very little money.³ At the November 11, 2016, India-Japan Annual Summit in Tokyo, Prime Minister Modi and Japanese Prime Minister Abe jointly announced the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) plan. India and Japan should expand their collaboration in Africa, according to this joint statement.⁴ Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested using India-Japan cooperation to promote the socioeconomic development of Asia and Africa during his 2016 visit to Japan. The India-Japan Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) paper was introduced at the African Development Bank's 52nd Annual Meeting, which took place in Gandhinagar, India, from May 22 to May 26, 2017. According to Prime Minister Modi, the goal of both Japan and India is to advance collaboration and development in Africa. Representatives from Africa and Japan praised this announcement as important. Interestingly, the AAGC was discussed soon after the May 14–15, 2017, Beijing summit on China's Belt and Road Initiative. Many analysts think that India's introduction of the AAGC is a calculated attempt to counter China's. Notably, the AAGC was discussed soon after the May 14–15, 2017, Beijing summit on China's Belt and Road Initiative. Many analysts think that India's unveiling of the AAGC is a calculated attempt to thwart China's Belt and Road Initiative, especially in the Indian Ocean region.⁵ According to Dr. Jagannath Panda's article, China's growing political influence in the region—particularly the Belt and Road Initiative—is one of the main reasons behind the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor project, which is a result of the growing convergence of India and Japan's economic and strategic interests in the larger Indo-Pacific region.⁶

The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC): What is it?

In order to promote the socioeconomic development of Asia and Africa, the AAGC encourages economic cooperation between Japan and India.⁷ A proposal has been made to connect this project with Southeast Asia, India, and other nations in the Indian Ocean region. The concept emphasises the inclusion of African people in addition to trade and the economy. Africa's increasing significance in India's foreign policy is highlighted by the AAGC initiative. India has a great chance to improve its trading position in the international market because to this corridor.⁸

The AAGC hopes to create new maritime corridors that connect the African continent with South Asian and Indian countries in order to promote a “free and open Indo-Pacific.” For example, there are proposals to link ports in Jamnagar, Gujarat, with Djibouti in the Gulf of Aden; similarly, ports near Madurai and Kolkata, as well as the port of Sittwe in Myanmar, will be connected to the ports of Mombasa and Zanzibar. India's “Sagarmala” plan, which focuses on port modernisation, new port development, improved port connectivity, port-led industrialisation, and coastal community development, is thus complemented by this project. The AAGC also suggests infrastructure development connecting Asian and African countries in addition to these marine routes.⁹

Through collaboration between India and Japan, the AAGC also aims to build infrastructure and digital connectivity throughout Africa. This initiative will focus on areas like health and pharmaceuticals, agriculture and agro-processing, disaster management, and skill development.¹⁰ The AAGC's fundamental idea is to work with the international community to promote innovative, open, and integrated development throughout the Asia-Africa area. Numerous organisations, including those in the commerce and education sectors, will receive assistance from this project. Trade facilitation has been highlighted by African trade ministers, who

have listed issues include improving infrastructure, expanding production and trading capacity, cutting transaction costs, and overhauling regulatory and customs systems.¹¹

Integrating partner countries' current initiatives is the goal of the AAGC effort. It will support initiatives aimed at increasing production and exports. India has already worked to strengthen capacities in other Asian and African countries through a number of projects, but many of these have not yet reached their full potential because of a lack of funding.¹²

Development projects in the fields of health and pharmaceuticals, agriculture and agro-processing, disaster management, and skill development would be given top priority under the AAGC plan. High-quality infrastructure will support features of connectivity. Geographic simulation models will be used to leverage economic benefits for Africa through integration with India, South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Indian Ocean states in order to fully realise the AAGC project's potential.¹³ A process of extensive engagement in Asia and Africa will be used to establish the people-centered sustainable strategy that the AAGC envisions, which will involve governments, civil society, and other stakeholders. The four primary pillars of AAGC projects are: 1. Skills and capacity building, 2. High-quality infrastructure, institutional and digital connectivity, 3. Cooperation and development, and 4. Forming interpersonal relationships.¹⁴ In order to promote development in Africa, these four pillars are essential. Such a concept would be advantageous to both India and Africa. India is the most economical trading partner for Africa; turning to the US or Europe for this reason would be a major mistake.¹⁵

The three main goals of the AAGC initiative are to: (1) increase mutual engagement between India and Japan with regard to Africa, mainly through the development of "quality infrastructure investments"; (2) connect the Indian Ocean region with Africa through Asia-Africa cooperation—made possible by the India-Japan partnership—while also guaranteeing the involvement of African countries in the decision-making process; and (3) create a free and values-based Indo-Pacific region by 2025.¹⁶ Additionally, India wants to address issues in African countries' social sectors and enhance their domestic well-being. In order to achieve this, India's Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program has given thousands of scholarships to African students over the years. Building a "model of cooperation" with Africa that is "demand-driven and free from conditionalities" has been a priority for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.¹⁷

AAGC is associated with five significant parameters: 1. Effective mobilization of financial institutions, 2. The socioeconomic development of participating nations and areas, 3. The efficient mobilisation of financial institutions, 3. Implementing strict quality standards in accordance with accepted international norms to lessen the effects on the environment and society, 4. Sustainability and economic efficiency; 5. Contribution to the local economy and society; and 6. Security and resilience to disasters.¹⁸

The AAGC is crucial to both Asia and Africa because of the prospects presented by the continent's rapid growth and Asia's robust economy. Younger populations and quickly increasing social indicators are advantageous to both areas. Additionally, the AAGC can play a significant role in developing new production channels, extending current value chains, encouraging technical and economic cooperation to improve capacity, and fostering increased people-to-people contact between the two continents. Over time, this initiative can be crucial in advancing development and accomplishing common objectives.¹⁹

Japan's and India's roles in Africa

Over the past 20 years, India's economic ties with African nations have increased, with numerous public and private sector businesses making investments in the continent. Additionally, trade between the two nations has multiplied fivefold. The India-Africa Summit Forum in 2008 marked the beginning of multilateral interaction with African nations.²⁰ The amount increased from US\$11.9 billion in 2005–06 to US\$56.7 billion in 2015–16. India has three levels of interaction with African countries: bilateral, regional, and multilateral. With the “India-Africa Forum Summit” (IAFS), India started multilateral involvement. At the Government of India's third IAFS summit in 2015, it was declared that India would help empower Africa, and it also offered US\$10 billion in aid to African countries.²¹

Japan and African countries have a long history together. Japan's Africa policy is characterised by its endorsement of “African ownership.” The Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), which was founded in 1993 with the goal of promoting development and security in Africa via multilateral collaboration, is the most important effort between Japan and Africa.²² It is noteworthy that during the post-Cold War era, Japan began to focus on Africa, while Western countries decreased economic assistance to African governments and stopped considering the continent as strategically essential. Two essential pillars support the entire TICAD process: 1. African Ownership, which guarantees that African countries take the lead in their own development; and 2. International Partnership, which guarantees that the international community backs these initiatives. Bloomberg claims that Abe's pledge to invest \$30 billion at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development in Kenya is intended to demonstrate his “faith in Africa's future.”²³

Japan and India have a unique international and strategic alliance. China's increasing dominance in the Asian region, freedom of travel along maritime lines of communication, the eradication of terrorism, and continued economic development are among the mutual objectives of both countries with regard to the African continent.²⁴

The China Factor and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor

China's “One Belt, One Road” project prompted the proposal for the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor.²⁵ According to maritime analyst Abhijit Singh, China would try to improve its military facilities in the area and increase its influence by building the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka. In a similar vein, China is working on the “East Coast Rail Link” project in Malaysia. In terms of Malaysia's commercial routes, it is thought that China may be able to avoid Singapore in the upcoming years. Additionally, according to Abhijit Singh, this might make ASEAN weaker and possibly lead to neighbouring states turning against one another.²⁶

China has long been worried about a possible blockade of the hydrocarbon resources—roughly 80% of its supply—that cross the Strait of Malacca due to the United States' increasing dominance in the Indo-Pacific and its perception of being surrounded by American forces.²⁷ Whether through the “Maritime Corridor” program or the “String of Pearls” plan, China aims to cement its supremacy in the Indo-Pacific area on this basis. Through these initiatives, China is trying to establish its dominance over the seas. All of these elements stem from China's main worry, the “Malacca Dilemma.”

One of the busiest and most significant maritime routes in the world is the Strait of Malacca, which separates the Indonesian island of Sumatra from the Malay Peninsula.²⁸ The Pacific and Indian oceans are connected by this route. Eighty percent of China's hydrocarbon supplies would be blocked if this port were taken over; China sees this as a danger to its security and worries that the US and India would work together to carry out such a move. As a result, China wants to become so autonomous and prevalent in the Pacific and

Indian Oceans that India is unable to stop it. However, the idea of an Indo-Pacific region that is “free and open” is supported by China, India, and Japan.

China and India approach Africa in radically different ways. China prioritises infrastructure and “chequebook diplomacy”—using financial support and investment to gain favour with other countries. India, on the other hand, encourages trade growth in addition to cooperative projects and initiatives focused on the development of Africa’s human resources, all the while maintaining prepared to support the continent.²⁹

The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor’s shortcomings

In order to build this initiative, Japan and India will work together. But there are several flaws in the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor that underscore the difficulties;

- Given that China is Africa’s largest trading partner, China’s position in the continent presents India with the greatest challenge. India’s total commerce was \$70 billion in 2014–15, while China’s was \$220 billion. Additionally, China invests more in Africa than in North America, allocating 70 percent of its total investment to the continent.³⁰
- Although Article 9³¹ of the Japanese Constitution restricts the size of the Japanese military, it is necessary for Japan to have a navy in order to safeguard its investments and trade in the Indo-Pacific region and make sure that no barriers occur in its economic activities. This clause limits Japan’s military capability by prohibiting the deployment of armed forces in any foreign country.
- India is the largest importer of arms, yet it lags significantly behind China; economically, too, India trails behind China.³²

Conclusion

One important initiative that is largely focused on the development of African countries is the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. Africa has become a major market because it has the youngest population in the globe. China is currently evaluating the African market and successfully implementing its “One Belt, One Road” project there. India believes that China could use commercial expansion to build its own empire in Africa, just as the British government formerly used trade to build its empire across numerous countries. India seeks to offset China’s impact in this context. India plans to integrate with South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Oceania in order to achieve economic benefits using a geographical simulation model.

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