

Strategic Implications of Indo-Japanese Cooperation on the 'Asia and Africa Growth Corridor'

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ABSTRACT India and Japan's economic vision is that of an Asia and Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) empowering states to peacefully counter and constrain Chinese revisionism. However, a stable AAGC will depend on enhanced security cooperation and the current rules-based order upheld by the US-led security framework. While current Indian and Japanese engagements in Asia are conducive to successful cooperation, weaker economic and military engagements with African countries pose a challenge to the stable environment on which an Asia and Africa Growth Corridor depends.

INTRODUCTION

As the United States continues to draw down its responsibilities as marshal of international security, visions of a multipolar world with Asian capitals such as Moscow, Beijing and Delhi rising to great power status are becoming increasingly common. China's incredible growth in East Asia, however, has outpaced most of its competitors and led to increased tensions in its neighbourhood and beyond. Seeing itself encircled by US troops, China has long sought to preempt a blockade of approximately 80 percent of its hydrocarbon

resources passing through the Malacca Straits.¹ In pursuing a dual strategy of military expansion across strategic nodes of trade in the Indo-Pacific, referred to as a "string of pearls", and massive infrastructure projects across Eurasia, known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's engagements challenge US dominance of the seas and threaten the trade and energy security of its neighbours. As winners of globalisation, India and Japan are highly dependent on free and open trade: while Japan remains the world's fourth largest

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export economy, over 30 percent of India's GDP and growth are import and export driven.² Calling for the establishment of an Asia and Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) in November 2016, both India and Japan present an alternative vision for cross-regional economic cooperation. Engaging with countries on a multilateral level, the AAGC Vision consists of four pillars – Development and Cooperation Projects; Quality Infrastructure and Institutional Connectivity; Enhancing Capacities and Skills; and People-to-People Partnership.³ With more ports and alternative lanes of trade opening up, an AAGC could provide participating countries with support against predatory economic actors and the opportunity to peacefully constrain Chinese unilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, Africa's eastern coast, and beyond. By locating the AAGC vision within an overarching security framework, this brief holds that the project's success depends on current US-led security arrangements as well as both India and Japan's ability to cooperate effectively across stable security environments. This brief will evaluate the opportunities and limits of the AAGC and argue that while the Asian component enjoys a stronger overarching security framework and economic engagement from Japan and India, greater political will is required in terms of security and economic cooperation in Africa for a corridor of cross-continental growth to succeed.

SOLID INDO-JAPANESE RELATIONS BUILD THE FOUNDATION FOR AAGC COOPERATION

India and Japan's increasingly close ties over the past three decades lay the groundwork for an ambitious AAGC vision of cooperation. From supporting each other's bids for greater

status within the United Nations Security Council, to cooperating on the economic development of India's Northeast, India and Japan enjoy bipartisan support and more significantly, continuity.⁴ Furthermore, during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's September 2017 summit in Ahmedabad, India, these ties reached a new level when both expressed support for each other's neighbourhoods. They condemned North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, as well as Pakistan-based terrorist networks such as the Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e Muhammad.⁵

Both leaders' unveiling of the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train at the same summit underlined their commitment to a mutually beneficial Indo-Japanese cooperation, which is expected to serve as a blueprint for further infrastructure projects across Asia and Africa. For Japan, this initiative comes as a consequence of PM Abe's May 2016 push to link infrastructure ventures with development cooperation projects and expand these beyond traditional partners in Asia.^{6,7} As a consequence of losing bids to construct bullet train networks in Indonesia (in 2015) and in Thailand (in 2017) to its regional competitor, China,⁸ Japan has had to find creative ways to make its projects economically and politically more attractive to its partners in ASEAN. According to Masayoshi Ono, an adviser to the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), a new combination of infrastructural projects and Official Development Assistance (ODA), working under the assistance motto of "Work together, build together" will therefore "not only lead to technical skill transfers, but also create many opportunities for local engineers

and companies which will be provided with contracts to implement their projects".⁹ Knowledge transfers between India and Japan will be mutually beneficial: as educational centres in India receive key technologies, as many as 50,000 Indian students are set to study in Japan.¹⁰ With the possibility of gaining employment upon graduation, this increase in exchanges may help Japan as it seeks high-skilled employees for its shrinking workforce. Close ties and exchanges between Japan and India within the first stage of the AAGC Vision provide a promising testing ground for future cooperation across Asia and Africa.

DIASPORA AND GEOGRAPHY: INDIA'S LINCHPIN BETWEEN ASIA AND AFRICA

Japan can benefit from India's historical links to the Indian diaspora across maritime Asia and East Africa. As the Modi government emphasises India's shared heritage with its broader diaspora, showcasing India's Hindu and even Buddhist origins, can be seen as part of his strategy to attract other Asian states to the homeland.¹¹ Yet with major Muslim Indian populations settled across Southeast Asia, and less religious links to draw on in East Africa, India's people-to-people exchanges cannot solely be driven by cultural diplomacy. Instead, India's rising economy and regional outreach will be key to driving both political and economic exchanges between its sizeable and well-integrated diaspora across Southeast Asia and Africa.¹² Despite its own weak manufacturing industry,¹³ India has the opportunity to serve as the linchpin for Japanese and ASEAN private sectors eager to transfer their manufacturing industries to other developing countries. By engaging with

its broad diaspora, and linking business communities together, India can play an active role and benefit from connecting Asian markets with Africa's rising middle class.

AAGC: VISION AND PROSPECTS FOR SUCCESS IN MARITIME ASIA

As an advocate of regional connectivity based on open trade, fair rules, and regional unity, the AAGC Vision is especially amenable to ASEAN countries. India and Japan's multilateral approach to regionalism puts them in a position as ideal external partners in the region. As India opened up its economy in the 1990s, New Delhi's early policy to 'Look East' took precedence and came to signify an interest in learning from and engaging with the rising economies of East and especially Southeast Asia.¹⁴ Japan, too, has enjoyed a positive image within ASEAN due to its constructive engagements with businesses and development aid since the 1970s.¹⁵ Despite growing in regional importance, India still enjoys the image of a benevolent country due to its long history of defending the rights of weaker states. While India and Japan prefer stronger ASEAN unity, China's own territorial disputes with multiple maritime states in the South China Sea compel it to encourage division within the region. This approach was most notable at the ASEAN Summit in 2016, in which the Cambodian host acquiesced to Chinese interests by blocking discussions on regional territorial disputes in the South China Sea.¹⁶ With almost half of global trade tonnage passing through the Straits of Malacca alone,¹⁷ Japan and India are inevitably bound to Southeast Asian stability. As concern regarding the rise of China increases in Southeast Asia, the AAGC may come to

provide a new multi-regional platform from which states may seek unity beyond a fractured ASEAN.

AAGC SUCCESS IN ASIA IS TIED TO U.S. SECURITY COOPERATION

Although AAGC-led port and railroad development projects across Asia and Africa will empower member states, strong security frameworks are needed to ensure these regional partners' bargaining power. Japan, India and other Southeast Asian countries' perceived security threats are increasing as Beijing's drive for hard power capabilities becomes central to its long-term competition over resources and foreign markets.¹⁸ During Abe's September 2017 visit to India, the Japanese Prime Minister emphasised the need for hard power to preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific: repeating his 2006 call for an "arc of democracies" – a "security diamond" composed of Japan, India, the US, and Australia seemed more urgent than before.¹⁹ For India, a continued US commitment to security cooperation remains the best option for countering China.²⁰ Beyond the US' unrivalled military capabilities, its military presence straddles both sides of the Indo-Pacific, where it provides security umbrellas for Japan and South Korea, and has developed a growing cooperation with India buttressed by the 2015 Joint Strategic Vision.²¹ As America draws back its military role in the Indo-Pacific, it too seeks to transfer greater responsibilities to India and Japan — the two major regional democracies in the region.

The regional approach espoused by the AAGC establishes India and Japan as key drivers of growth, but does not constitute a credible force of deterrence on its own. Given

the impending withdrawal of the US from the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) in the build-up to the US presidential election, PM Abe and PM Modi's call for an AAGC on 11 November 2016, fulfils a variety of Indian and Japanese aspirations. For India, which decided not to join the TPP over concerns regarding tariff regimes,²² the AAGC provides Delhi with far greater political clout in a South-South arrangement of which it has long been a leader. The AAGC Vision also establishes Japan as the main economic powerhouse, in both the remaining TPP countries, as well as the future AAGC. Whether the soft power inherent to the AAGC's neoliberal regional integration vision can on its own counter the combined economic and military approach of China is however questionable: regional integration spearheaded by India and Japan remains possible in maritime Asia due to the positive security ties both countries enjoy with the US and its regional security framework.

AFRICA'S SECONDARY ROLE IN THE AAGC VISION: A STRATEGIC OVERSTRETCH?

While the AAGC Vision document has ambitious plans to connect Asian trade with Africa, the African continent plays a secondary role in both countries' security concerns and grand strategy. With the call for an AAGC coming after the third India Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) at the end of 2015 and the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in 2016, its launching at the African Development Bank summit in Gujarat in May 2017, reflects a growing interest of policymakers to demonstrate India's pledge to African development.²³ Much,

however, needs to be ironed out and the organisations and especially countries with which India and Japan want to cooperate, are yet to be determined. The vast diversity between and within African countries and regions makes the continent particularly difficult to deal with, and a lower commitment to the African component of the AAGC is noticeable in the composition of academics involved in the development of the original vision document. With only two academics from "Africa" out of 27 contributors (from institutions in Australia, Indonesia, India, Japan and Singapore), more involvement from African academics is required at the outset.²⁴ While the three main think tanks working on the AAGC Vision document are based in Japan, India, and Indonesia, a fourth African institute was absent in the early stages. A lack of African participation at the outset of the project indicates the extent to which the continent plays a secondary role for India and Japan.

As an emerging BRICS donor and champion of developing nations within the World Trade Organization (WTO), India does however enjoy close relations with African states, of which a majority support India's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.²⁵ For Japan, India's engagement in South-South cooperation provides a special opportunity to strengthen ties with African economies. Unlike other regional players, businesses from both countries largely enjoy positive images in African states, possibly due to their smaller uncontroversial presence. As India gains in economic size and regional status, however, its position as a leader in South-South cooperation may become untenable. PM Modi's increasingly activist

foreign policy and growing partnership with the US is part of a decades-long shift away from India's 'Third Worldist' outlook.²⁶ As such, prospects for African integration within the AAGC are limited due to shifting domestic politics in India, and more significantly, due to a weak structural engagement with the region.

A CALL FOR DEEPER ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENTS WITH AFRICA

To be effective, AAGC countries must actively diversify their economic engagements in Africa. For most foreign investors, Africa has long been of interest primarily for its vast natural resources. As Chakrabarty illustrates, despite oil and gas being the main drivers of Indian trade in Africa, commercial prospects in the energy fields have frequently proven disappointing for Indian companies.²⁷ To make further inroads into Africa's raw materials market, AAGC countries must make a serious commitment towards developing broader private-public partnerships and constructive ties with African economies. This means going beyond India's current manufacturing, pharmaceutical and agricultural projects in a select few East African countries. Along with India's pledged US\$10 billion at the India Africa Forum Summit in 2015, Japan too seeks to increase its significantly larger trade in the region. By its pledged US\$30-billion investment in African infrastructure and decision to bring 100 businessmen to the sixth TICAD summit in September 2016,²⁸ Japan cemented its interest in African growth across the Nacala Corridor (which starts in Mozambique)²⁹ and in West Africa. Diversifying its engagements with other industries within African economies — like

China has, with US\$38.4 billion investments in African greenfield technologies in 2015-2016³⁰ alone — is essential if the AAGC intends to be of relevance across the continent. Indeed, India and Japan can invest in digital highways across Africa, such as cooperating on cyber security, but also promote development through data sharing and block chain technologies. While Japan remains a major leader in technology, India has risen as a powerhouse of digital innovation with new technologies, such as the centralised identification program, Aadhar, as well as hygiene and agriculturally oriented phone applications affordably produced for India's scale.³¹ These innovations and other technologies exchanged via ASEAN, could provide new opportunities for interested partners in Africa and help expand linkages across the two continents. As promoters of greater cross-regional connectivity, India and Japan must diversify their economic activities in Africa if they want the AAGC to work across both continents.

CHALLENGING CUSTOMS (AND BORDERS) FOR AFRICA AND THE AAGC

The greatest political challenge for the AAGC as it promotes increased connectivity in Africa will be the breaking down of onerous customs barriers. As a continental grouping of all 55 states, the African Union consists of multiple regions – with some of the most complex customs checks globally. Despite cooperation within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), custom border and police checks are particularly taxing on trade, where lorry drivers can spend weeks on journeys that would normally take only a few days.³² One response has been to introduce

India's own Single Window Interface for Facilitating Trade (SWIFT) initiative to interested African states.³³ SWIFT, a programme that has already been put in use in India, is a digital set-up that minimises bureaucratic hurdles for importers and exporters by allowing them to submit all their documents on one single online platform. However, states often lack the ability and more importantly incentives to change the status quo,³⁴ as local economies develop around checkpoints, and underpaid law-enforcement officers are often prone to corruption. India's own experience shows that barriers to trade often have less to do with border customs systems than with regional and domestic politics. This is evident within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), where an intra-regional trade at only five percent of total trade, makes South Asia the least economically integrated region globally.³⁵ Spearheading cross-border trade and regional integration in Africa may prove difficult for an island nation like Japan, and India, whose own trade and foreign policy reflect an interest to move beyond their own backyards.

People-to-people movement and cross-investments with Africa face significant challenges, yet are promising over the long term. Despite dealing with a severe decline in its population, Japanese immigration reform often faces stiff opposition by voters who fear a loss of national identity. Recent changes indicate that Japan, too, will gradually open up its gates to more foreign workers,³⁶ even as Japan's strict quotas, and educational and linguistic conditions for employment continue to create significant barriers to entry. While the Modi government moves away from a legacy of autarky and

protectionism and continues the process of dismantling India's so-called License Raj, an assumed 80 percent of India's businesses remain within the unregulated sector.³⁷ However, government reforms are showing positive results, with India jumping to place 100 from its previous ranking of 130 on the World Bank's 2017 ease of doing business index.³⁸ Domestic reforms are set to play a positive role in global perceptions on India's economy. Once India becomes friendlier for local business, and foreign direct investment alike, its long history of educational exchanges and trade with African states will bear fruit.

AAGC'S ABSENT SECURITY FRAMEWORK IN AFRICA

Unlike in Asia, Japan, India and the US are unable to provide a security framework in Africa that can buttress deeper engagements with the AAGC. Japan's pacifist constitution and its political environment make it an unlikely actor in bolstering the AAGC within a distant African security framework. Although Japan maintains a naval base in Djibouti for peaceful purposes and non-traditional threats such as piracy,³⁹ the role of the military remains a sensitive one amongst Japan's electorate. With the country's defence minister Tomomi Inada resigning in 2017 after using her ministry to gain votes for the Liberal Democrat Party (LDP),⁴⁰ and following news of a cover-up involving Japanese peacekeeping troops fighting in South Sudan,⁴¹ general unease with the LDP's military-related scandals was widespread. Opposition leader Yuriko Koike's Tomin First party's subsequent landslide victory in the Tokyo Assembly elections was interpreted as a consequence of such voter frustration. Despite a history of anti-piracy operations,

cooperation with littoral countries such as Mozambique for which it mounts maritime patrols,⁴² as well as extensive peacekeeping missions in Africa,⁴³ India must continue to seek greater security cooperation with the US in peacekeeping missions on the continent. US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's emphasis on India's significance in Africa indicates a growing acceptance and encouragement of Indian engagement in the region,⁴⁴ though this is not as firmly exhorted as in the case of the Indo-Pacific. India, the world's number one importer of weapons, will need to develop greater capacity at home as well as abroad to buttress greater interest for its projects in Africa.

In addition to a lower Indian and Japanese military presence, America's own security framework in Africa is increasingly being replaced by a rising China. While the US remains the paramount military power in Africa with 6,000 troops in the continent and an unparalleled capacity to project power via the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM),⁴⁵ China's combined economic and military footprint is undeniably increasing. With an estimated 68 percent of African military equipment now coming from China⁴⁶ and its first naval base in Djibouti, Beijing has slowly underscored a new era in African security. It is conceivable that US reticence may encourage a more confident and activist China to fill the vacuum. When US help in fighting rebel insurgencies in Nigeria was not forthcoming in 2006, China, Nigeria's top supplier of military hardware stepped in to meet the demand.⁴⁷ Using its proximity to the Red Sea and special location in East Africa, it is conceivable that China may seek to undermine Indian and Japanese security and trade

interests in the Indian Ocean. Where the AAGC in Asia effectively fits within a greater security constellation between the US, Japan, India, and increasingly Australia, a distant Africa lacks an equally robust framework.

CONCLUSION

The Asia and Africa Growth Corridor Vision is a bold attempt at improving Indian and Japanese strategic depth beyond the Indo-Pacific region. This brief has argued that while both countries' economic and strategic engagements with external powers in maritime Asia are strong enough to challenge a revisionist China, greater political and economic will is necessary for the AAGC Vision to be relevant in Africa. The AAGC promises great opportunities for trade, unity and regional integration across Asia and Africa. As China tests the waters in the East and South China Seas and creates wedges within ASEAN, an Indian and Japanese promotion of the AAGC may both strengthen regional unity, and provide opportunities for deeper linkages among similarly oriented countries. In Africa, India can use its unique geographical location between the East and West to serve as an intermediary between Japan, ASEAN and African economic interests. States across maritime Asia as well as Africa may view the Asia and Africa Growth Corridor which focuses on connectivity as an alternate way to ensure their access to resources and trade. While the removal of customs barriers across parts of Africa can spur immense regional growth, promoting this will remain one of the AAGC's greatest political challenges. This brief has argued that the AAGC vision remains weak with regards to Africa, not only as a consequence of a limited engagement with

African academics in its initial stages, but also due to lower levels of strategic engagement on the continent. Having the option to increase its own involvement, Beijing may eventually choose to seek greater responsibilities in determining regional norms, trading patterns, and alignments across the continent. Chinese credibility remains strong because its trade is buttressed by its growing military power, and China is able to use this combined advantage to great effect, particularly in Africa.


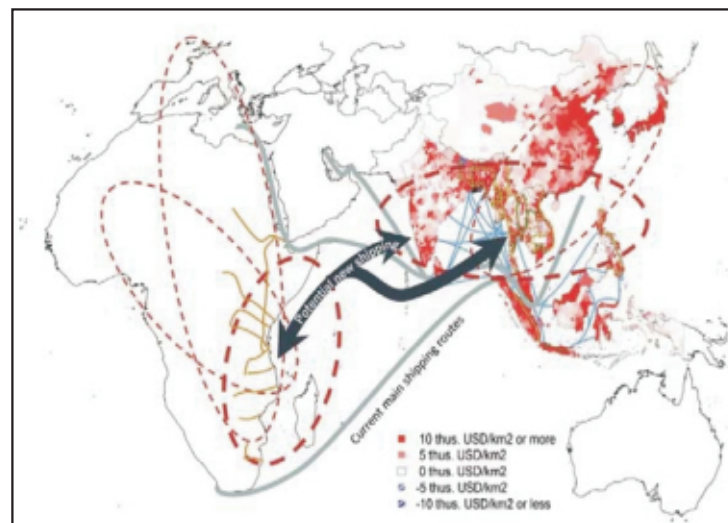
Attempts to gain regional credibility will largely depend on domestic dynamics and regional cooperation. In India, increased power will depend on improved governance, equitable economic growth, and a greater focus on defense capacities. In Japan, pressure for greater contributions to regional security is already building at the leadership level for a revision of the pacifist Article Nine of the country's Constitution. Internationally, a strengthening of quadrilateral security cooperation between Japan, India, the US, and Australia may prove crucial in upholding a free and open Indo-Pacific. Rather than lead to increased brinkmanship with China, a sensibly calibrated transfer of military responsibilities and technologies from the US to the Indian Navy would increase respect for India as it pursues its own goal of great-power status. As the US military presence decreases in the Indo-Pacific, India and Japan's commitment to free and open trade across Asia and Africa should be encouraged as a model for stability in the decades to come. Ultimately, hard power in the form of military cooperation amongst the leading members of the AAGC will be required to serve as a regional balancer, and bring about greater stability and prosperity across Asia and Africa. 

Fig.1:



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, “A new foreign policy strategy: ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” Diplomatic Bluebook 2017, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2017/html/chapter1/c0102.html>

Fig.2: Asia Africa Partnership: Linkage with Southeast Asia and East Asia and Prospective GDP Growth



Source: Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) and Institute for Developing Economies/Japan External Trade Organization (IDE-JETRO), “Asia Africa Growth Corridor Partnership for Sustainable and Innovative Development: A Vision document,” RIS Publication Unit, May 2017, asia_africa_growth_corridor_vision_document_may_2017.pdf

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