


India and Japan pivot to Africa

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe | PTI

CHENNAI: India's bid to increase its influence in the Indian Ocean region has gotten a boost from the strategic relationship established with Japan during Shinzo Abe's recent visit. With China being an elephant in the room in almost all discussions involving countries in the Indo-Pacific region, New Delhi has deftly increased cooperation with the Japanese government in matters of defence and security. The annual Malabar exercise has become the signature of Indo-Japan ties apart from the various Japanese industries and industrial parks that operate in the country.

When China hosted its first Belt and Road Forum in May this year, India gave it a royal miss. It had its own plans. Barely a week after the Belt and

Road Initiative meeting, India hosted the annual meeting of the African Development Bank (AfDB) in Gandhinagar, Gujarat where Prime Minister Narendra Modi released a vision document on the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which was prepared as a counter-weight to the BRI project. This ambitious initiative entails detailed consultations across Asia and Africa focused on people-centred sustainable growth strategy.

This is a clear departure from the BRI as China tends to create policies on its terms without much discussions with the countries that it gets involved in. The Vision Document released by the AfDB in May clearly spells out the strategy to maximise the potential for trade and investment in the Indian Ocean region in general and within the African continent in specific with Japan and India as the engines driving it forward as two large and responsible democracies. The document spells out four key target areas, 1) development and cooperation, 2) quality infrastructure and institutional connectivity, 3) skill enhancement, and 4) establishing people-to-people partnerships.

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The AAGC synergises India's Act East policy and combines it with Japan's 'Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure' to enable a stronger focus on investments in Africa. The spirit of the AAGC is furthermore based on a "consultative" character where Africa has a role to play in the decision-making process on projects, which is not so much the case with the BRI.

Japan enters the race for Africa

Japan's outreach to Africa is nascent at best with little investment which is where China has filled in. With India having a lot of goodwill with many African countries, Japan could harness that trust to build on a fruitful economic relationship on the terms and conditions accepted by both the recipient country and the investing partner. Modi has stated that India's diplomacy with Africa will be based on a "model of cooperation" that will, crucially, be "demand-driven and free of conditions".

There are similarities with Japan's views in this regard. The AAGC aims to advance India and Japan's mutual outlook towards Africa on an entire

continental level with emphasis on investment and robust infrastructure. Also, a broader connection with the Indian Ocean region is also envisaged with the cooperation of the African countries, especially the ones with littoral connectivity on the oceanfront. India can harness the cultural and traditional history that it shares with Africa with regards to the diaspora community that lives there. Many private players from India have established great trade links with many African countries that have turned out to be a boon for advancing the economic interests of India. Moreover, it has contributed to the development of Africa's infrastructure landscape. Japan wants to put more focus on Africa to reach parity China, which maintains a towering presence in the continent.

The Japanese have clearly spelt out their reservations on the economic packages and investments that China has been offering to many African countries. Japan has accused China of exploiting Africa's resources to its gain.

Point of convergence

Shinzo Abe has stressed on the need for peace and stability in the Indian Ocean region. This strategic convergence can lead to an enhanced partnership between the two countries. Since the main objective is to promote an open regional order, it will invite competition with BRI. With the focus specifically towards Africa, the AAGC is more continental in nature while BRI expands across to Asia and Europe. It will be interesting to see how the plan goes forward with the current visit of Abe to India.

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