

## **A CASE FOR DEVELOPMENTAL CORRIDORS THROUGH TRILATERAL ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN INDIA, JAPAN AND COUNTRIES OF AFRICA — INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT**

*Anum Khan & Suraj Palavalsa*

The intent for India-Japan collaboration in Africa has been a steady feature of the bilateral partnership for nearly a decade. It found its most prominent expression in the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), unveiled at the Annual Meeting of the African Development Bank (AfDB) in Gandhinagar in May of 2017.<sup>1</sup> Although the “AAGC label” has since receded from official usage, the commitment that it embodies has not. India and Japan have continued, at successive summits, to reaffirm their shared interest in cooperating with African partners.<sup>2</sup> This paper argues for carrying that intent forward through trilateral engagement between India, Japan, and African countries, in which African partners are co-architects of the agenda rather than its recipients.

The rationale underpinning such engagement has, if anything, grown stronger. India’s trade with Africa rose from about US\$ 62.7 billion in FY 2017-18 to nearly US\$ 93.7 billion in FY 2025-26.<sup>3</sup> Japan has placed an “*Economic Region Initiative of Indian Ocean-Africa*” at the centre of the Ninth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD 9).<sup>4</sup> At their 16th Annual Summit in July 2026, the Prime Ministers of India and Japan committed to promoting “*concrete cooperation*” in Africa, based on the synergy between their respective initiatives.<sup>5</sup>

The problem, therefore, is not a lack of political intent. It is the absence of a vehicle capable of translating that intent into implementable projects. This paper argues that trilateral engagement between India, Japan and countries of Africa can find that vehicle in developmental corridors — integrated land-sea systems of connectivity, with the maritime domain as their spine, co-created with African partners and directed towards development in the places they connect. Drawing on the National Maritime Foundation’s (NMF) systems approach to connectivity, it introduces the

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<sup>1</sup> Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No 2694: Asia-Africa Development Corridor, , 03 January 2018, [https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha?dtl/29306/QUESTION\\_NO2694\\_ASIAAFRICA\\_DEVELOPMENT\\_CORRIDOR](https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha?dtl/29306/QUESTION_NO2694_ASIAAFRICA_DEVELOPMENT_CORRIDOR).

<sup>2</sup> Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs Media Releases, “15th India-Japan Annual Summit Joint Statement: Partnership for Security and Prosperity of our Next Generation”, 29 Aug 2025, para 20, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents?dtl/40062>.

<sup>3</sup> Government of India, Department of Commerce, Export-Import Data Bank (TradeStat), India-Africa Trade, FY 2017-18 to FY 2025-26, compiled by the authors.

<sup>4</sup> Government of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Announcement of ‘Economic Region Initiative of Indian Ocean-Africa’”, 20 Aug 2025. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/ic/ap\\_m/pageite\\_000001\\_01171.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/ic/ap_m/pageite_000001_01171.html).

<sup>5</sup> Government of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “16th Japan-India Annual Summit Joint Statement”, para 25, 02 July 2026. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/101054198.pdf>.

concept and sets out why such corridors matter, what distinguishes them from the conventional corridor concepts, and how the three partners might jointly operationalise them through commercially viable, African-owned projects.

### **Connectivity as a System**

Even “physical connectivity” should be understood not simply as the presence of physical links between maritime and terrestrial spaces, but as the interaction of nodes, networks, actors and flows within a shared space. NMF’s recent work, “*Rethinking Maritime Connectivity — Towards Connected Maritime Systems*”, provides the conceptual starting point. It defines six interrelated dimensions of connectivity: physical; trade and transport; digital; people-to-people and cultural; energy; and ecological.<sup>6</sup> It also proposes six questions through which any connection can be examined: (1) Which ports are being sought to be connected? What is the medium upon which this connectivity is envisaged (riverine? oceanic? digital? all three?)? Which platforms or entities would travel upon this/these mediums (ships? data-packets? Both?)? What would these platforms carry (cargo? passengers? Data-streams? All three?)? Which are the policies that have been [or are being] formulated to facilitate all this? And finally, what are the legal and normative frameworks that will govern them?<sup>7</sup>

The analytical value of this framework need not remain confined to the maritime domain alone. Nodes, networks, actors, and flows, are equally the building blocks of terrestrial connectivity. A port, a dry port, a one-stop border post, and an inland Special Economic Zone (SEZ), are all nodes. Shipping lines, railways, power grids, and data networks, are all networks. What the maritime framework adds is an insistence that the land and sea segments of a corridor are parts of a single system rather than separate projects handed over at the quayside. A maritime space is not merely a transport leg between two ports. It connects economies and geopolitical interests, and the infrastructure that serves it may cross several jurisdictions.

Any corridor linking India, Japan and Africa, therefore, would perforce have both a maritime and a terrestrial component, and neither is sufficient on its own. A well-served port with poor hinterland links is a gateway to nowhere. A modern railway without a reliable port and regular shipping services is a line that ends at the coast.

### **From Mine-to-Port to Mine-to-Value**

Corridors that integrate both components can connect resource-rich geographies to a network of logistical and industrial value chains. They link a mine, an agricultural production centre, an

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<sup>6</sup> VAdm Pradeep Chauhan and Suraj Palavalsa, “Rethinking Maritime Connectivity — Towards Connected Maritime Systems”, *National Maritime Foundation website*, 21 September 2026, <https://maritimeindia.org/rethinking-maritime-connectivity-towards-connected-maritime-systems/>.

<sup>7</sup> VAdm Chauhan and Palavalsa, “Rethinking Maritime Connectivity”.

industrial cluster, or an energy project, to a maritime port and, subsequently, to regional and global markets, bringing together hard infrastructure, soft connectivity, trade facilitation, logistics, technology and finance. In this sense, the corridor can become a mechanism for shifting from a “*mine-to-port*” model towards a “*mine-to-value*” model.

A conventional corridor simply moves a commodity from its point of extraction to a port, where it enters the international market as an unprocessed or minimally processed resource. A ‘*developmental*’ corridor, by contrast, incorporates the economic activities that take place along the route. Mining can be connected to processing, processing to manufacturing, manufacturing to logistics, and logistics to maritime trade. The corridor thereby becomes a productive ecosystem rather than merely a transportation route, and its success may be measured not only by the volume of goods moved, but by the local employment, industrial capacity, technological capability and value addition it generates.

This distinction is particularly relevant to Africa. The continent holds about 30 per cent of global reserves of critical energy-transition minerals, including cobalt, copper, graphite, lithium, manganese, nickel, platinum-group metals and rare earth elements,<sup>8</sup> alongside considerable agricultural and renewable-energy potential. Yet Africa’s share of global critical-mineral revenues is estimated at only about 10 per cent,<sup>9</sup> and many African economies still export minerals in raw or semi-processed form. Access to resources alone does not guarantee economic transformation. The persistent challenge is to connect extraction to domestic and regional value creation.

Ports, in this conception, are not merely the terminal point of a continental corridor. A port connected to mineral-processing facilities, industrial parks, renewable-energy infrastructure, digital networks, and efficient logistics systems, can become an engine of regional economic activity. The maritime component is, therefore, not an adjunct to continental connectivity. It is the critical interface through which inland economic activity is integrated into regional and global production networks.

### **Why a New Concept is Needed**

The AAGC experience offers one central lesson. Its 2017 Vision Document articulated a valuable developmental ethos: quality infrastructure, capacity-building and people-centred

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, “Critical Minerals can Power Africa’s Structural Transformation”, 15 Sep 2026. <https://www.un.org/osaa/en/news/critical-minerals-can-power-africas-structural-transformation>.

<sup>9</sup> Landry Signé, “How Africa can benefit from the global mineral rush”, *Brookings Institution*, 04 June 2026. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-africa-can-benefit-from-the-global-mineral-rush/>.

growth<sup>10</sup> but it never defined what kind of corridor it was. It contained no project pipeline and no institutional owner; it treated the ocean as background rather than as the medium joining the two continents; it was framed in Asia and presented to Africa, and it offered companies no clear benefit.<sup>11</sup> Indian and Japanese engagement in Africa continued, but through separate bilateral channels rather than a shared framework. The difference is stark: not a single one of the 202 Lines of Credit (LoCs) extended by the Export-Import Bank of India (Exim Bank) to African partners lists a port or maritime project as its stated purpose,<sup>12</sup> while Japanese cooperation (since 2000) includes more than thirty port-related projects across sixteen African countries.<sup>13</sup> Trilateral engagement will meet the AAGC's fate unless it rests upon a clearer corridor concept, a maritime spine, African co-ownership, and commercial logic.

## A Changed Context

The connectivity landscape has, meanwhile, become considerably more complex. Four developments shape the context for trilateral engagement.

- (i) **A Less Predictable Maritime Environment.** The Red Sea crisis demonstrated how exposed Asia-Africa-Europe trade is to disruption at a single chokepoint. By early February 2024, container tonnage crossing the Suez Canal had fallen by 82 per cent,<sup>14</sup> with ships rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope. The diversion briefly increased traffic around Africa's coasts. Yet, inefficiencies and congestion prevented major African ports from fully seizing the opportunity.<sup>15</sup> The lesson here is that Africa's maritime geography is an asset only when its ports and logistics systems are competitive enough to use it.
- (ii) **Maturing African Frameworks.** The "African Continental Free Trade Area" (AfCFTA) has created the institutional basis for treating African markets as an interconnected economic space; by July of 2025, 49 of 54 African Union member-States

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<sup>10</sup> RIS, ERIA and IDE-JETRO, "Asia-Africa Growth Corridor: Partnership for Sustainable and Innovative Development – A Vision Document", *Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS)*, May 2017. [https://aagc.ris.org.in/sites/aagc.ris.org.in/files/2021-09/AAGC\\_Press\\_Release%20%281%29.pdf](https://aagc.ris.org.in/sites/aagc.ris.org.in/files/2021-09/AAGC_Press_Release%20%281%29.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Takuya Taniguchi, "Should We Forget about the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor?", *Lettre du Centre Asie*, No 87, French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), 19 October 2020. <https://www.ifri.org/en/editorials/should-we-forget-about-asia-africa-growth-corridor>.

<sup>12</sup> Export-Import Bank of India, "Exim Bank's List of Signed LOCs", updated as of June 2026, compiled and analysed by the authors. The classification is based on the stated purpose of each Line of Credit.

<sup>13</sup> JICA, *Cooperation Project Records for Africa, 2000–2025*.

<sup>14</sup> UNCTAD Rapid Assessment, "Navigating Troubled Waters: Impact to Global Trade of Disruption of Shipping Routes in the Red Sea, Black Sea and Panama Canal", Feb 2024. <https://unctad.org/publication/navigating-troubled-waters-impact-global-trade-disruption-shipping-routes-red-sea-black>.

<sup>15</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), "Red Sea Crisis Affects African Ports", 29 February 2024. <https://www.eiu.com/n/red-sea-crisis-affects-african-ports/>.

**Read Also:** Celine Bacrot and Marc-Antonie Faure, "Red Sea Crisis and Implications for Trade Facilitation in Africa", UNCTAD, 17 Apr 2024. <https://unctad.org/news/red-sea-crisis-and-implications-trade-facilitation-africa>.

had ratified it, even though only about 25 of them were trading under its preferences.<sup>16</sup> The African Union's "2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy" (AIMS 2050), adopted and endorsed in December 2012, already links maritime security to economic development, environmental protection and human security.<sup>17</sup> ***Any trilateral engagement must be anchored in these African frameworks rather than in external designs.***

(iii) **Japanese and Indian Instruments.** In February of 2025, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) launched the "Japan-India Cooperation Initiative for Sustainable Economic Development in Africa", seeking to harmonise the instruments of the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), the Nippon Export and Investment Insurance (NEXI), and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).<sup>18</sup> In July of 2026, JETRO, with inputs from Indian and Japanese industry, released a "Strategic Outlook for Expanding Japan-India Cooperation in Africa", proposing five priority actions, including stronger financing and risk-mitigation support through JBIC, JICA, NEXI, the Export Credit Guarantee Corporation of India (ECGC), and India's Exim Bank.<sup>19</sup> The Joint Statement of the "16<sup>th</sup> India-Japan Annual Summit" explicitly links TICAD, the Economic Region Initiative of Indian Ocean-Africa and the Japan-India Cooperation Initiative. India, for its part, elevated SAGAR to MAHASAGAR in March 2025<sup>20</sup> and approved a ₹69,725 crore maritime package, including a ₹25,000 crore Maritime Development Fund (MDF).<sup>21</sup>

(iv) **Contested Corridors.** African corridors are now strategic spaces. In September of 2025, China, Zambia, and Tanzania, signed a US\$ 1.4 billion, 30-year concession to rehabilitate the Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA), even as Western partners backed the rival "Lobito Corridor" on the Atlantic coast.<sup>22</sup> Ports, logistics networks, and supply-chain resilience, have assumed a significance well beyond facilitating trade. For India and Japan, the question is not whether to compete corridor-for-corridor, but how to offer

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Ncube, "African Union Trade Deal Tops \$220 Billion as AfCFTA Tariffs Cover Just 25 Countries", *Rio Times*, 05 September 2026, <https://www.riotimesonline.com/afcfta-status-2026/>.

<sup>17</sup> "2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy", African Union, December 2012. <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/UA179647e.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Government of Japan, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), "The Japan-India Cooperation Initiative for Sustainable Economic Development in Africa", 27 February 2025. <https://www.meti.go.jp/files/900011789.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), "Strategic Outlook for Expanding Japan-India Cooperation in Africa", July 2026. [https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext\\_images/\\_Reports/02/2026/38eaa21a93f4fba2/202607\\_en.pdf](https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext_images/_Reports/02/2026/38eaa21a93f4fba2/202607_en.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Press Trust of India, "PM Announces MAHASAGAR Vision with Mauritius for Maritime Security, Trade", *India Today*, 13 Mar 2025. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/prime-minister-narendra-modi-mahasagar-vision-mauritius-maritime-security-trade-navinchandra-ramgoolam-2692904-2025-03-13>.

<sup>21</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, "Revamping of Shipbuilding Industry", Press Information Bureau (PIB), Government of India, 24 Jul 2026, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2288924&reg=48&lang=1>.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Ncube, "US and EU Pour \$6 Billion into Lobito Corridor as China Revives TAZARA Rail Rival in Zambia", *The Rio Times*, 07 Sep 2026. <https://www.riotimesonline.com/lobito-corridor-africa-ports-2026/>.

African partners something distinct: connectivity characterised by quality, co-ownership, and value-addition.

The constituent parts of meaningful trilateral cooperation, including Japanese instruments, Indian maritime capability, African continental frameworks, and summit-level political endorsement, now exist. Even though its fourth summit had to be postponed (in May 2026<sup>23</sup> owing to the Ebola epidemic), the “India-Africa Forum Summit” (IAFS), nevertheless offers a natural occasion to bring them together. What is still missing is the concept that connects them.

### **From ‘Bilateral’ to ‘Trilateral’ Engagement**

The challenge today is not simply to establish connectivity between Asia and Africa, but to determine what that connectivity is intended to connect, for whose benefit, and what economic activity it generates along the way. The question is consequently shifting from “*How can India and Japan connect with Africa?*” to “*How can India and Japan participate in African-led connectivity and value-creation ecosystems?*”

The proposed trilateral framework does not seek to impose another ‘externally conceived’ corridor upon the African continent. It would work with existing and emerging African corridors, national development priorities, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and maritime gateways. India’s longstanding development partnership with Africa — including its experience in capacity-building, digital public infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, energy, and human-resource development — provides one set of capabilities. Japan brings extensive experience in infrastructure, technology, manufacturing, logistics, quality infrastructure, and development finance. African States possess the resources, markets, geographical position, and development priorities, around which such partnerships would need to be structured. The objective is to combine these strengths rather than reproduce a donor-recipient model of development.

Trilateral engagement also represents a move away from a predominantly bilateral conception of India-Africa and Japan-Africa relations. The reference to “*countries of Africa*”, rather than to Africa as a single undifferentiated partner, is deliberate. Engagement must be structured corridor by corridor and country by country, with the national plans, regional communities, and gateways concerned. Cooperation could initially focus on selected maritime gateways, critical-resource value chains, logistics systems, and industrial clusters, making the partnership project-oriented and outcome-driven.

### **Limits of Existing Corridor Concepts**

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<sup>23</sup> Kallol Bhattacharjee, “India-Africa Forum Summit Postponed in Wake of Ebola Virus Outbreak”, *The Hindu*, 21 May 2026. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-africa-forum-summit-postponed-in-wake-of-ebola-virus-outbreak/article71005909.ece>.

The term “corridor” describes very different things in policy practice. A widely used evidence review for the UK Department for International Development (DFID) traces an evolution in stages. A basic “transport route” becomes a “transport corridor” as hard infrastructure links economic centres. It becomes a “trade and logistics corridor” as soft infrastructure, such as customs, border procedures, digitalisation, and regulatory harmonisation, improves. Finally, it matures into an “economic corridor” as investment, industry and urban growth cluster along the route.<sup>24</sup> Other institutions offer related formulations:

- (i) **Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) (2013).** JICA’s “Corridor Development Approach” denotes “*a strategy to integrate and synergise infrastructure development and industrial development*”, with the aim of “*inclusive economic growth in the whole region*”.<sup>25</sup>
- (ii) **African Development Bank (AfDB) and NEPAD<sup>26</sup> (2013).** Here, the “development corridor” concept “*transforms transport corridors into engines of socioeconomic development*”.<sup>27</sup>
- (iii) **AUDA<sup>28</sup>-NEPAD (2023).** In the AUDA-NEPAD conceptualisation, an “*Integrated Corridor Approach*” structures infrastructure projects “*to maximise job creation, enhance climate friendliness, improve connectivity between urban and rural areas, link infrastructure with other economic sectors*”.<sup>29</sup>
- (iv) **World Bank (2024).** As per the World Bank, “transport corridors” physically connect areas of a region, while “economic corridors” which change to “development corridors” in their most advanced stage, integrate the region’s economic activities.<sup>30</sup>
- (v) **African Union Commission and OECD (2025).** For the AUC and the OECD, “development corridors” aim to stimulate economic integration, investment and development

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<sup>24</sup> Albie Hope and John Cox, “Development Corridors”, EPS PEAKS Series of Topic Guides, UK Department for International Development (DFID), Government of UK, December 2015, Summary. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08995e5274a31e000016a/Topic\\_Guide\\_Development\\_Corridors.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08995e5274a31e000016a/Topic_Guide_Development_Corridors.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Hitoshi Ara, “The Corridor Development Approach in Africa and the Role of the Private Sector”, Presentation, Urban and Regional Development Group, Infrastructure and Peacebuilding Department, JICA, 2013, 04, <https://afdb-org.jp/wp-content/uploads/6.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> NEPAD is an abbreviation for “New Partnership for Africa’s Development”

<sup>27</sup> Gadzeni Mulenga, “Developing Economic Corridors in Africa: Rationale for the Participation of the African Development Bank”, Regional Integration and Trade Department, *African Development Bank Group, NEPAD*, No 1, April 2023, 02. <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/document/regional-integration-brief-developing-economic-corridors-in-africa-rationale-for-the-participation-of-the-afdb-32380>.

<sup>28</sup> AUDA is an acronym that expands to the “African Union Development Agency”

<sup>29</sup> “Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA): First 10-Year Implementation Report”, *AUDA-NEPAD*, African Union, June 2023. <https://www.nepad.org/publication/pida-first-10-year-implementation-report>.

<sup>30</sup> “Corridors for Development and Growth”, Transport Global Practice, *World Bank Group*, 2024, 15. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099101524184531877/pdf/P181190-22cb18d1-f2b6-4c10-8fa2-0ea47ad7b012.pdf>.

through complementary infrastructure, trade facilitation and sectoral development (e.g. agriculture, mining, manufacturing) across borders.<sup>31</sup>

Two observations follow:

*First*, the “development corridor” as a concept, is already an African policy instrument. Across Africa, at least 80 “development corridors” have been planned, are under construction, or are operational, and the “Integrated Corridor Approach” of the “Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa” (PIDA) now underpins the continent’s infrastructure agenda.<sup>32</sup> Trilateral engagement should, therefore, plug into corridors that African institutions have already identified, rather than imposing new ones.

*Second*, the definitions share one assumption: the corridor is essentially terrestrial and linear, a spine of road or rail along which activity accumulates. The sea appears, if at all, as the ‘*end node*’ at which the corridor meets a port. For corridors linking India and Japan with countries of Africa, this assumption is inadequate. What is required is a set of land-sea connections linking production centres in India and Japanese supply chains, through ports and the Indo-Pacific, to African coastal economies, their hinterlands and landlocked economies further inland

### Introducing the Concept: “Integrated Land-Sea Developmental Corridors”

An integrated land-sea corridor, so understood, can still serve purely commercial ends. It may move cargo efficiently while leaving the societies along its route largely unchanged. Trilateral engagement with African partners requires something more demanding. The corridors through which India, Japan, and African countries engage must, therefore, be developmental in purpose as well as in form. For this purpose, a **“developmental corridor” is understood to be an integrated land-sea system of connectivity. Within it, identified nodes in Asia and Africa are linked through maritime and terrestrial networks, actors and flows across the six dimensions of connectivity. These linkages are deliberately directed towards the sustained development of the territories and communities that the corridor connects. The corridor is co-created and co-owned with partner countries, anchored in their national, regional and continental development priorities, enabled by facilitating policies, and governed by legal and normative frameworks. Its success is measured by local value creation, employment, capability and resilience, as well as by commercial returns.**

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<sup>31</sup> “Africa’s Development Dynamics: Infrastructure, Growth and Transformation”, African Union Commission and OECD, 2025, 32. [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/10/africa-s-development-dynamics-2025\\_d153f2a8/c2b40285-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/10/africa-s-development-dynamics-2025_d153f2a8/c2b40285-en.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> African Union Commission and OECD, “Africa’s Development Dynamics 2025”, 10.

**Read Also:** AUDA-NEPAD, “PIDA: First 10-Year Implementation Report”, ix.

This definition retains what the international formulations share: a defined geography, a transport backbone, and the ambition of turning movement into wider development. However, it departs from them in three important aspects: *First*, it treats the sea as part of the corridor rather than as its end point. *Second*, it extends the corridor beyond transport and industry to all six dimensions of connectivity. *Third*, it makes co-creation and co-ownership with partner countries part of the definition rather than an implementation preference. Where a transport corridor asks how efficiently goods move, a “*developmental corridor*” asks what the movement leaves behind in the places it connects, whether on the coast or a thousand kilometres inland. It is, in this sense, the conceptual form of the “mine-to-value” model. Applied to trilateral engagement, the six dimensions translate into concrete components across land and sea, as may be gathered from **Table 1**.

**Table 1: Six Dimensions of Connectivity Applied to India-Japan-Africa Developmental Corridors**

| Dimension of Connectivity            | Maritime Component                                                               | Terrestrial Component                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Physical</i>                      | Ports as development nodes; regular shipping, coastal and island services        | Road, rail and inland-waterway links; dry ports; access for landlocked States                              |
| <i>Trade and Transport</i>           | Direct liner services; port efficiency; maritime single windows                  | One-stop border posts; customs and transit harmonisation; SEZs, industrial corridors and supplier linkages |
| <i>Digital</i>                       | Port community systems; submarine cable connectivity                             | Interoperable customs, logistics and payment platforms                                                     |
| <i>People-to-People and Cultural</i> | Maritime skills, seafarer training, shared Indo-Pacific heritage                 | Vocational training, academic and diaspora networks, local enterprise development                          |
| <i>Energy</i>                        | Port-based and offshore energy; green bunkering                                  | Power supply for corridor industry; regional power pools                                                   |
| <i>Ecological</i>                    | Fisheries, blue-economy livelihoods, coastal resilience, marine spatial planning | Land-use planning, water resources, biodiversity safeguards along the corridor                             |

**Source:** *Compiled by the author(s), drawing on VAdm Chauhan and Palavalsa, “Rethinking Maritime Connectivity”.*

The six questions, in turn, become a test that every proposed trilateral project must pass. Which African and Asian nodes does it connect? Through which maritime and/or terrestrial media? By which entities? What flows through it: cargo? data? energy? people? skills? Which policies enable it? And which legal and normative frameworks, including AfCFTA rules, regional transit agreements, the 2050 AIMS, and environmental and social standards, govern it? A project that cannot answer these questions is not yet even a corridor project.

A “*developmental corridor*” also distinguishes between connections that States construct and those that exist irrespective of them. Ports, railways, power lines and cables are built. Fisheries, rivers, watersheds and ecosystems are not. The corridor must be designed so that the connections it constructs do not undermine the natural systems on which livelihoods depend, whether of

fishing communities on the coast or farming communities inland. **Table 2** summarises how the concept differs from a conventional corridor.

**Table 2: “Conventional Corridors” and “Developmental Corridors” Compared**

| Dimension                        | Conventional Corridor                                                                          | Developmental Corridor                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Spatial Form</b>              | Terrestrial and linear; the port is the end node                                               | Integrated land-sea system; the maritime domain is the spine                                                                           |
| <b>Role of African partners</b>  | Hosts or beneficiaries of externally conceived projects                                        | Co-creators and co-owners; priorities drawn from national, regional and continental plans                                              |
| <b>Economic model</b>            | Point-to-point transit: goods move from origin to port with little value added along the route | Value-chain integration: production, processing, manufacturing, energy and services clustered along the route, retaining value locally |
| <b>Scope of connectivity</b>     | Transport and, at best, industry                                                               | All six dimensions: physical, trade and transport, digital, people-to-people, energy, ecological                                       |
| <b>Measure of success</b>        | Tonnage, transit time and commercial return                                                    | Local value, jobs, capability and resilience, alongside commercial return                                                              |
| <b>Drivers of implementation</b> | Governments and individual financiers                                                          | Governments, industry, port authorities, shipping lines and financial institutions, supported by risk-sharing                          |

*Source: Compiled by the author(s)*

### **The NMF Approach**

The NMF approach proceeds from a single proposition. India-Japan-Africa trilateral engagement should be organised as a network of “developmental corridors”, co-created with African partners, made commercially viable through shared risk, and anchored in the India-Japan partnership. Its distinctiveness lies in the systems perspective it brings. Existing studies of India-Japan cooperation in Africa have approached it largely through geopolitics, development cooperation, or competition with China. The NMF treats connectivity as a *system* rather than a collection of sectors and, as a maritime institution, the NMF recognises the ocean as the spine that joins the terrestrial, digital, energy and institutional networks of the partner regions.

**On African Agency.** Developmental corridors must be anchored in “Agenda 2063”, the AfCFTA, the 2050 AIMS and the national development plans of partner States. Projects should originate-in or be jointly identified-with, African governments, RECs, and the African Union. African institutions such as the African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank), the Africa Finance Corporation (AFC) and the African Trade & Investment Development Insurance (ATIDI) should be co-financiers rather than observers. Japan’s emphasis at TICAD 9 upon “*co-creation*” and India’s principle of “*demand-driven partnership*” provide a shared normative basis.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Government of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Ninth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD 9)”. August 2025, <https://www.un.emb-japan.go.jp/files/100992148.pdf>

**On Growth: From Provision to Partnership.** ‘*Growth*’ needs to be reconceptualised as “*partnership-driven development*”. The relevant questions are whether a corridor generates local employment and supplier linkages; builds African capacity (the “material wherewithal”) and capability (the human skills, human ingenuity and, human-engineered organisations and processes) to operate and maintain its assets; supports value addition within Africa; and strengthens economic resilience. These — not tonnage — are the measures by which African partners will judge the corridor.

**On Nodes and Flows.** “*Development corridors*” should be built around identifiable gateway ports and the inland corridors they serve, including routes to landlocked economies. These include Mombasa and the Northern Corridor, Dar es Salaam and the Central Corridor, Nacala and its corridor into Malawi and Zambia, and island nodes such as Port Louis and Toamasina. Several already carry Japanese investment. JICA has financed the Mombasa Port Development Project and supported the Dongo Kunfu Special Economic Zone adjacent to Mombasa Port,<sup>34</sup> while the Nacala Corridor, too, is the subject of a dedicated Japanese initiative.<sup>35</sup> India has deep commercial, diaspora and maritime-security ties along the same coast; the opportunity lies in converting parallel presence into joint corridor development.

**On Flows: Addressing the Missing Middle.** A corridor is only as strong as the services that run along it. India-Africa trade remains constrained by limited direct shipping routes and high freight costs, with a significant share of cargo moving through Persian Gulf hubs.<sup>36</sup> Port performance on the African coast has improved but still remains uneven. For instance, at Mombasa, the principal gateway for the Northern Corridor, the dwell time for containerised import cargo averaged about 105 hours (roughly four and a half days) in the first half of 2026. Yet vessel waiting time (*before* berthing) rose by 48 per cent, to 46 hours, over the same period.<sup>37</sup> Across developing economies more broadly, in December of 2024, container ships waited an average of 10.9 hours to berth, against 6.4 hours in developed economies.<sup>38</sup> More berths alone will not solve this. Coordinated attention is required to liner services, port operations, customs procedures, digital systems, and inland transport.

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**Read Also:** Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, “India-Africa Relations”. <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Africa-India-Background-Brief-Final.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> “Promoting Development in Kenya: Sixty Years of Partnership”, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Kenya Office, March 2023. [https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/kenya/office/others/ku57pq00003ue3tb-att/brochure\\_en.pdf](https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/kenya/office/others/ku57pq00003ue3tb-att/brochure_en.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> Government of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Launch of the Region-Wide Co-creation for Common Agenda Initiative for Mozambique, Malawi, and Zambia: ‘Strengthening the Global Supply Chain through Nacala Corridor Development’”, TICAD, 20 August 2025. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/ic/cap3/pageite\\_000001\\_00002.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/ic/cap3/pageite_000001_00002.html).

<sup>36</sup> Sakshi S Basutkar, “How Middle East Hubs are Powering India-Africa Trade Flows”, *Logistics Update Africa*, 27 Jan 2026. <https://www.logupdateafrica.com/trade/how-middle-east-hubs-are-powering-indiaafrica-trade-flows-1357942>.

<sup>37</sup> “Biannual Report: January to June 2026”, Northern Corridor Transport Observatory, 08-10. <https://top.ttcanc.org/documents>.

<sup>38</sup> “Review of Maritime Transport 2025: Staying the Course in Turbulent Waters”, Chapter IV, UNCTAD, 24 September 2025, 104. [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2025\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2025_en.pdf).

## Eastern Africa and the Western Indian Ocean

Since Prime Minister Shinzo Abe first articulated his vision of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) at TICAD VI in Nairobi, in August 2016,<sup>39</sup> Japan has increasingly viewed the Indian Ocean as the maritime bridge connecting Asia and Africa. This places Eastern Africa and the Western Indian Ocean at an important intersection of the Indo-Pacific’s economic and maritime geography, given the region’s location along major sea lanes, its resource-rich hinterlands and its network of maritime gateways. It is the natural first theatre for trilateral “*developmental corridors*”.

Across Eastern and Southern Africa, corridors increasingly converge on ports such as Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, Nacala, Beira, Maputo, and Durban. Japan’s “Economic Region Initiative of Indian Ocean-Africa” seeks to deepen economic linkages between Africa and Indian Ocean economies, including that of India, through trade, investment, connectivity, and industrial cooperation.<sup>40</sup> It provides a basis for viewing Eastern Africa not merely as a destination for development cooperation but rather, as a strategic interface between the African continent and the wider Indian Ocean ecosystem — one in which India is a natural co-participant.

The geography of Africa’s critical minerals reinforces the case. These resources are frequently located far from ports, requiring investment in railways, roads, power, and logistics before they can enter global value chains. TAZARA connects Zambia’s copper belt with Dar es Salaam, while the Nacala Corridor gives Zambia and Malawi access to the Indian Ocean through Mozambique and is the subject of a dedicated Japanese initiative launched at TICAD 9.<sup>41</sup> Whether these corridors remain “mine-to-port” routes or become “mine-to-value platforms” depends on what accompanies the infrastructure. African policy increasingly recognises this. A five-year “Southern African Development Community” (SADC) regional project, launched in June 2026, explicitly seeks to retain value from cobalt, lithium, manganese, nickel, copper and platinum-group metals through beneficiation at source, skills development and local enterprise.<sup>42</sup> This is precisely the kind of African-led priority around which trilateral engagement should be structured.

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<sup>39</sup> Tsuneo [Nabe] Watanabe, “Japan’s Rationale for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy [1]”, International Information Network Analysis, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 30 Oct 2019, [https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/watanabe\\_01.html](https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/watanabe_01.html).

<sup>40</sup> Government of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Announcement of ‘Economic Region Initiative of Indian Ocean-Africa’”, 20 August 2025.

<sup>41</sup> Government of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Launch of the Region-wide Co-creation for Common Agenda Initiative for Mozambique, Malawi, and Zambia: Strengthening the Global Supply Chain through Nacala Corridor Development”, 20 August 2025. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/ic/cap3/pageite\\_000001\\_00002.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/ic/cap3/pageite_000001_00002.html).

<sup>42</sup> UNECA, “SADC Launches Landmark Initiative to Build Sustainable Energy Transition Mineral Value Chain”, <https://www.uneca.org/stories/sadc-launches-landmark-initiative-to-build-sustainable-energy-transition-mineral-value>.

## Green Shipping and Maritime Energy as Early Pathways

Green Shipping offers a practical avenue through which trilateral engagement can begin, particularly across the Western Indian Ocean. The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) has highlighted Africa's solar and wind resources as a basis for the continent's potential role in producing low- and zero-carbon marine fuels.<sup>43</sup> At an IMO regional workshop in Mombasa in February 2025, more than 200 representatives from 35 countries identified sustainable port development, alternative-fuel production, green maritime jobs, seafarer training, and investment, as priorities for the continent's shipping transition.<sup>44</sup> A demand for technical cooperation and investment already exists.

India can extend its own domestic green-port experience into this engagement. Its "*Harit Sagar* Green Port Guidelines" of May 2023 aim to reduce the carbon intensity of port operations and increase the use of renewable energy and cleaner fuels.<sup>45</sup> India's "Green Tug Transition Programme" aims to convert at least 50 per cent of tugs at the country's Major Ports to green alternatives by 2030,<sup>46</sup> and the Deendayal Port Authority, the Paradip Port Authority, and the VO Chidambaranar Port Authority, have all been recognised as "green hydrogen hubs".<sup>47</sup> Japan, for its part, signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with Singapore in December 2023<sup>48</sup> based upon the 2021 "Clydebank Declaration" on green shipping corridors.<sup>49</sup>

A practical manifestation of trilateral engagement could, consequently, be the piloting of green maritime corridors linking selected Indian and African ports, combining port decarbonisation, alternative-fuel bunkering, vessel-efficiency measures, digital port-call systems, and training for maritime personnel. Existing instruments provide building blocks. India and Japan signed a

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<sup>43</sup> "Unlocking Opportunities for Green Shipping in Africa", *Maritime Africa*, 10 May 2023, <https://maritimafrica.com/en/unlocking-opportunities-for-green-shipping-in-africa-2/>.

<sup>44</sup> International Maritime Organisation (IMO), "African Countries Prepare to Roll out Net-Zero Shipping Strategy", 10 Feb 2025. <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pages/whatsnew-2222.aspx>.

<sup>45</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, "*Harit Sagar*: Green Port Guidelines", May 2023, [https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/Harit%20Sagar%20-%20Green%20Port%20Guidelines%20\(May%202023\).pdf](https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/Harit%20Sagar%20-%20Green%20Port%20Guidelines%20(May%202023).pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, "Standard Operating Procedure: Green Tug Transition Programme (GTTP)", 22 Aug 2024, <https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/GTTP%20SOP%20with%20forwarding%20letter.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Press Information Bureau, "Three Major Ports Recognised as Green Hydrogen Hubs under National Green Hydrogen Mission", 10 Oct 2025. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2177591&reg=48&lang=2>.

<sup>48</sup> Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore, "Factsheet on Memorandum of Cooperation between the Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Singapore and the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism of Japan", 16 December 2023. <https://www.mpa.gov.sg/media-centre/details/factsheet-on-memorandum-of-cooperation-between-the-ministry-of-transport-of-the-republic-of-singapore-and-the-ministry-of-land-infrastructure-transport-and-tourism-of-japan>.

<sup>49</sup> Government of the UK, Department for Transport Policy Paper, "COP26: Clydebank Declaration for green shipping corridors", 06 Dec 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cop-26-clydebank-declaration-for-green-shipping-corridors/cop-26-clydebank-declaration-for-green-shipping-corridors>.

“Memorandum of Cooperation on the Joint Crediting Mechanism” (JCM) in August 2025,<sup>50</sup> while Japan has JCM partnerships with several African countries, including Kenya, Ethiopia, Senegal, Tunisia, and, since May 2025, Tanzania.<sup>51</sup>

Marine biofuel using *jatropha curcas* plants offers another concrete illustration. Nippon Biofuel Co (NBF) has been engaged in cultivation of *jatropha curcas* in Mozambique through a local subsidiary since 2012.<sup>52</sup> In March 2026, NBF began a sea-route trial using African-produced *jatropha curcas* oil as fuel for a Japanese-operated RO-RO vessel.<sup>53</sup> In April 2026, its JPY 7 billion supply-chain project, centred on Mozambique’s Nampula Province and Ghana’s Bono East Region, was selected under METI’s Global South Future-Oriented Co-Creation programme, with bunkering planned in Mozambique, Ghana, Singapore and Japan and a target of 400,000 tonnes a year by 2032.<sup>54</sup> Because *jatropha curcas* is a non-edible crop that can grow on marginal land,<sup>55</sup> the model links African biomass production, rural livelihoods, renewable energy and maritime fuel supply. It shows how a “developmental corridor” can extend beyond minerals to connect African agriculture with green-fuel demand in the Indian Ocean. India’s green-port and green-hydrogen ambitions, and the potential for bunkering at Indian ports on the same routes, create a natural opening to make this a trilateral rather than a bilateral undertaking.

### Commercial Viability, Risk, and Finance

A corridor without investors is a corridor without a future. Private-sector hesitancy in Africa is less a question of opportunity than of risk: political and sovereign risk, currency risk, regulatory uncertainty and the high cost of preparing bankable projects. Risk mitigation must, therefore, be a core design element of “developmental corridors”.

The institutional building blocks exist already. JBIC, JICA and NEXI provide concessional finance, project finance and insurance, and NEXI became a shareholder of ATIDI in 2023.<sup>56</sup> Exim Bank operates concessional LoCs under the “Indian Development and Economic

<sup>50</sup> Government of Japan, Ministry of the Environment Press Release, “Signing of the Memorandum of Cooperation on the JCM between Japan and the Republic of India to Begin Cooperation to Create Carbon Credits through Decarbonization Projects”, 29 Aug 2025. [https://www.env.go.jp/en/press/press\\_00320.html](https://www.env.go.jp/en/press/press_00320.html).

<sup>51</sup> Government of Japan, The Joint Crediting Mechanism, “About the Mechanism: JCM Partner Countries”. <https://www.jcm.go.jp/jc/about/>.

<sup>52</sup> Nippon Biodiesel Fuel Co., Ltd, “Renewable Energy Business Overview”, [https://nbf-web.com/en/service\\_en/service\\_04/](https://nbf-web.com/en/service_en/service_04/).

<sup>53</sup> Japan Plant Fuel Co., Ltd, “Japanese Plant Fuel Company Demonstrates African Biofuel as a Fuel for Japanese Ships”, *PR Times*, 18 Mar 2026. <https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000005.000019049.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Oil & Fats International, “Nippon Biofuel in African project to establish marine biofuel supply chain for international shipping”, 01 May 2026. <https://www.ofimagazine.com/news/nippon-biofuel-in-african-project-to-establish-marine-biofuel-supply-chain-for-international-shipping>.

<sup>55</sup> Engine Online Website, “Nippon Biofuel selected for Japanese marine biofuel project”, 20 April 2026, <https://www.engine.online/news/nippon-biofuel-selected-for-japanese-marine-biofuel-project-7a5d>.

<sup>56</sup> African Trade & Investment Development Insurance, “ATI expands Shareholding base with New Membership of NEXI Japan”, 13 June 2023. <https://www.atidi.africa/ja/ati-expands-shareholding-base-with-new-membership-of-nexi-japan/>.

Assistance Scheme” (IDEAS), and ECGC provides export credit insurance.<sup>57</sup> Afreximbank, AFC, ATIDI, and the AfDB, all bring local knowledge and risk-absorption capacity. JETRO’s Strategic Outlook itself recommends “*a dedicated bilateral framework to facilitate trade finance and reduce associated risks*”.<sup>58</sup> What is lacking is a mechanism that brings these institutions — Indian, Japanese and African — together around a shared corridor pipeline. The stakeholder research will examine three instruments:

- (1) *A Trilateral Corridor Project Preparation Facility* to take corridor projects from concept to bankability, including feasibility studies, environmental and social assessment and transaction structuring.
- (2) *An India-Japan-Africa Maritime Risk-Sharing Framework* combining political-risk, credit and trade-insurance cover from NEXI, ECGC, and ATIDI, with partial guarantees from JBIC, Exim Bank, and African development finance institutions.
- (3) *Blended Finance for Port-Led Development*, combining Japanese ODA loans and Indian LoCs with commercial capital, drawing where relevant on India’s MDF and on JCM carbon-credit revenues for green-port and green-fuel projects.

The purpose is not to substitute public money for private investment, but to change the risk-return calculation enough to bring in private investment.

### **The India-Japan Partnership and the Role of Stakeholders**

The India-Japan partnership should be the principal pillar of trilateral engagement, as a partnership *with* Africa rather than merely being *about* Africa. Japan brings long-term finance, quality infrastructure standards, port engineering and a record of investment on the African coast. India brings cost-competitive manufacturing and services, project-execution experience, commercial and diaspora networks, and training capacity through the “Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation” (ITEC) programme. JETRO notes that African markets share many characteristics with those of India, allowing business models proven in India to be readily adapted for Africa.<sup>59</sup>

No single actor controls a “developmental corridor”. Chambers of commerce and industry bodies, such as the “Confederation of Indian Industry” (CII), the “Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry” (FICCI), the “Japan Business Federation” (which is still widely known as “Keidanren”), and African business councils identify opportunities. Port

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<sup>57</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Finance, Department of Economic Affairs, “Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme (IDEAS)”. <https://dea.gov.in/ideas>.

<sup>58</sup> JETRO, “Strategic Outlook for Expanding Japan–India Cooperation in Africa”, July 2026, 73. [https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext\\_images/\\_Reports/02/2026/38eaa21a93f4fba2/202607\\_en.pdf](https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext_images/_Reports/02/2026/38eaa21a93f4fba2/202607_en.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> JETRO, “Strategic Outlook for Expanding Japan–India Cooperation in Africa”, July 2026, 04.

authorities, terminal operators and shipping lines determine service viability. Financial institutions and insurers determine bankability. Ministries set policy, while RECs and the African Union Commission ensure continental alignment. The Developmental Corridor framework offers a common structure within which these actors, and initiatives such as the “Economic Region Initiative of Indian Ocean-Africa”, the “India-Africa Forum Summit” (IAFS) process, and the “Indian Ocean Rim Association” (IORA) can be connected, rather than each pursuing the same goal in parallel.

## Conclusion

The test of trilateral engagement will be the speed with which its concept produces a first project. The way forward lies in sequencing rather than ambition. Four steps could move the idea from concept to implementation:

- (1) *Anchor it in the Summit Calendar.* The rescheduled IAFS-IV and the next “India-Japan Annual Summit” offer natural platforms for India, Japan, and willing African partners, to endorse the concept, with an agreed scope and work plan.
- (2) *Begin with a Pilot Corridor.* The Northern- and the Nacala corridors are strong candidates, since Japanese investment, Indian commercial presence, and African priorities, already converge there. A “green maritime corridor” linking selected Indian and East African ports could run alongside as an early, low-cost demonstration.
- (3) *Designate an Institutional Owner.* A small joint secretariat, drawing on the “Development Partnership Administration” of India’s Ministry of External Affairs,<sup>60</sup> Japan’s METI and JETRO, and an African counterpart such as AUDA-NEPAD, should maintain the project pipeline, apply the six-question test, and report annually on progress.
- (4) *Measure What Matters.* Each project should be tracked against indicators that have been formulated through a process of agreement with African partners — local jobs, supplier linkages, skills transferred, value added within Africa, port and border performance, and private capital mobilised.

This NMF paper seeks to test these propositions against stakeholder evidence. India, Japan and their African partners do not need yet another vision. They need a ‘first voyage’, and partners with a stake in completing it.

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<sup>60</sup> The Development Partnership Administration (DPA) is a specialised agency within the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) established in January 2012 to handle and monitor India’s external development assistance and partnership projects abroad.

**About the Author(s):**

*Anum Khan is an Associate Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation. Her research is centred upon the multiple maritime facets of the eastern African littoral, about which she is deeply passionate. She may be contacted at [amgs2@maritimeindia.org](mailto:amgs2@maritimeindia.org).*

*Mr Suraj Palavalsa is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation. His current research focuses on reviving India's maritime consciousness, as also on ports and maritime connectivity, adopting an interdisciplinary approach to both areas. He can be reached at [emc1@maritimeindia.org](mailto:emc1@maritimeindia.org).*