

Chapter 7



El Mostafa

Rezrazi

Morocco

**The Strategic
shift in Afro-Asian
cooperation in
a reconfiguring
global order**

1. Introduction

In a changing world, marked by geopolitical instability, systemic crises, and the redefinition of power relationships, Afro-Asian cooperation is emerging as a strategic response to the limits of traditional multilateralism. Since the end of the twentieth century, and particularly since 1993, Afro-Asian platforms have come to occupy a growing place in the international architecture. Unlike other Africa-centric initiatives—such as Africa-European Union, Africa-Russia, and Africa-United States summits—Afro-Asian cooperation is shaped by post-colonial legacies, an assumed South-South solidarity, and converging geopolitical interests (Acharya, 2016; Alden and Large, 2019).

Though long viewed from the classic perspective of development aid and economic cooperation, the Africa-Asia relationship is now undergoing a major strategic reconfiguration. It is moving away from the asymmetrical donor-recipient model to become anchored in a dynamic of co-constructed partnerships, in which African states are finding greater room for maneuver in terms of partner selection, negotiation of cooperation terms, and diplomatic initiative. This new architecture of relationships, whether bilateral, multilateral, or hybrid, mobilizes a range of Asian players—China, Japan, India, South Korea—each with its own strategic vision, differentiated intervention mechanisms, and objectives set within specific timeframes. This pluralism offers Africa the opportunity to rebalance its external partnerships for mutual benefit and enhanced sovereignty.

The political and symbolic foundation of this cooperation remains the 1955 Bandung Conference, which laid the foundations for a partnership based on sovereignty, equality, and decolonization. A shared vision persists, based on national sovereignty, non-interference, economic justice, and political equality between states. Building on this legacy, platforms including the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the Tokyo International

Conference on African Development (TICAD), the India-Africa Summit (IAFS), and the Korea-Africa Cooperation Forum (KOAFEC), reflect the shared desire of African and Asian partners to bypass the normative frameworks imposed by the West. These mechanisms seek to establish more balanced partnerships, based on equity, reciprocity, and adaptation to the structural and cultural realities of the Global South.

Beyond their economic roles, these platforms are also levers of geopolitical influence. They enable the countries of the South to better coordinate their positions within multilateral forums, strengthen their strategic autonomy, and counterbalance existing hegemonic models by consolidating an axis of South-South cooperation with systemic alternatives. The strategic repositioning of this cooperation is reflected in the growing importance of non-economic issues, including regional security, climate resilience, technological innovation, cultural diplomacy, and the energy transition. It also corresponds to a paradigm shift in which Africa is no longer content to be a projection space, but is becoming a normative player in the regulation of global public goods and in the redefinition of global priorities.

In a context marked by the reshaping of international hierarchies, we analyze the dynamics, mutations, and issues shaping the Afro-Asian framework. This approach is based on a comparative reading of the main Africa-Asia cooperation platforms, which represent an emerging model of global governance based on the principles of equity, co-responsibility, and multipolarity. These spaces for dialogue and exchange are also characterized by a rich experimentation with varied forms of partnership, developed over the last three decades (1994-2024).

2. The Strategic Landscape of Afro-Asian Cooperation

The ideological foundation laid down by the 1955 Bandung Conference continues to nurture a relationship between Africa and Asia that is perceived as less intrusive than Africa's relationships with former colonial powers (Acharya, 2016). Respect for sovereignty and non-interference structure Afro-Asian relations. On the economic front, Asia has become Africa's largest trading and financial partner. China, India, Japan, and South Korea have set up specific frameworks for engagement. FOCAC, for example, is mobilizing massive investment in infrastructure, notably via the Exim Bank of China and the CADFund (Brautigam, 2009; Shinn and Eisenman, 2012). Japan, through TICAD, promotes quality infrastructure and human security (Ampiah, 2022), and strengthens cooperation through its agencies: JICA, JBIC and JETRO¹. India, via IAFS, focuses on pharmaceutical, educational, and digital cooperation (Singh et al, 2023). South Korea, through KOAFEC, seeks to strengthen partnerships in education, finance, and ICT (KOAFEC, 2023).

Cooperation also extends to security: peacekeeping, cybersecurity, maritime security, and the fight against terrorism. These themes are becoming key focus areas, particularly within the framework of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Unlike Western approaches, which are often come with conditions, Afro-Asian frameworks are based on pragmatism and African ownership (Haug and Kamwengo, 2023).

Culture also reinforces this dynamic. Confucius Institutes, Indian cultural diplomacy, K-Pop, and JICA are examples of soft power. Afro-Asian relations are perceived as less colonial, more egalitarian, and founded on a shared

memory of liberation and development (Hong et al, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

In comparison with other emerging platforms, such as Africa-Russia or Africa-Turkey summits, Afro-Asian cooperation has strong strategic foundations. It enables African states to diversify their partnerships and assert their sovereignty outside the post-colonial format (Emovwodo, 2019).

From a broader perspective, Afro-Asian partnerships are not limited to a purely economic dimension; they are political, security, and cultural instruments, helping to redefine global strategic balances. They reflect a growing desire to reposition Africa as a fully-fledged player in the dynamics of global governance. This cooperation offers African countries greater room for maneuver in the face of asymmetries in the international system, encouraging a diversification of partnerships and a renewed assertion of their sovereignty (Dlamini, 2019).

3. Resilience and Adaptability of Afro-Asian Forums

Despite recent geopolitical shocks—notably the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine—Afro-Asian forums have demonstrated remarkable resilience and a capacity for continuous adaptation (Alden and Large, 2019). Far from retrenching, they have extended their strategic reach by readjusting their priorities in response to new challenges.

At the ninth FOCAC summit, in Beijing in September 2024, China announced a financing plan worth 360 billion yuan, or about \$50.7 billion, spread over three years. The plan includes lines of credit, infrastructure investment, and clean-energy projects. Although Beijing has avoided announcing any concrete debt-reduction measures, the plan reflects a strategic shift. By introducing the concept

1. Respectively, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, Japan Bank for International Cooperation, and Japan External Trade Organization.

of ‘ironclad partnership’, China is seeking to broaden the foundations of its cooperation with Africa, integrating geopolitical, security, and technological aspects beyond mere economic investment (Reuters, 2024).

At the eighth TICAD, in Tunis in August 2022, Japan reaffirmed its commitment to Africa by announcing a total public and private contribution of \$30 billion over three years. This investment has three strategic axes: economic transformation, building resilient societies, and consolidating lasting peace and stability. Particular attention has been paid to human capital development, with the aim of training 300,000 African professionals. This is in line with Japan’s vision of development beyond traditional aid.

In parallel, the launch of the fifth phase of the Enhanced Private Sector Assistance Initiative (EPSA 5) increased Japan’s concessional lending through the African Development Bank (AfDB) from \$3.5 billion to \$4 billion. This phase focuses on key sectors including connectivity, agriculture, and nutrition. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) also highlighted its programs that support youth entrepreneurship and innovation, notably through the ABE initiative, the NINJA project, and the funding of fintech startups. In addition, Japan has pledged to mobilize a further \$5 billion to support the African private sector. These commitments illustrate a willingness to build mutually beneficial partnerships, highlighting the strategic use of development financing as a lever for sovereignty and local ownership in Africa (JICA, 2022a).

However, some observers questioned the quality and scope of these commitments. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s participation in the summit by videoconference was seen as a half-hearted diplomatic signal. Moreover, Morocco’s withdrawal in response to the participation of the Polisario separatist group, underlined the diplomatic limits of the summit, undermining its symbolic and strategic significance.

Despite no summit with Africa being held since 2015, India maintains its links via vocational training, scholarships, and technology centers. The IAFS framework continues to have an impact through knowledge diplomacy initiatives (King and Venkatachalam, 2021).

South Korea, through KOAFEC, in partnership with the AfDB, focuses on three strategic areas: entrepreneurship, climate resilience, and technological innovation (KOAFEC, 2023). This model is based on targeted and pragmatic technological diplomacy, although Korea’s financial resources are more modest than those deployed by FOCAC.

In 2024, Seoul hosted the first Korea-Africa Summit, with the theme: “The future we build together: shared growth, sustainability and solidarity”. This event marked a turning point in Korea’s approach, affirming its desire to strengthen a strategic partnership with Africa based on equity, innovation, and long-term vision.

Despite changing geopolitical dynamics and structural trends within the Global South, these forums as a whole remain deeply influenced by the spirit of the Bandung Conference (1955), which put forward the principles of South-South solidarity, non-interference, and economic justice (Acharya, 2016). This ideological framework continues to underpin the legitimacy of Afro-Asian initiatives and distinguishes them from Western platforms, which are often perceived as normative and prescriptive in their approach.

Moreover, this evolution illustrates mutual strategic learning: African countries are becoming more assertive in defining their priorities, while Asian partners are adapting their instruments to meet these expectations. This ability to adapt in a fragmented world makes Afro-Asian forums sustainable spaces for dialogue and action.

4. Political and Security Cooperation: A Shifting Landscape

Beyond the economic aspects, Afro-Asian forums are increasingly integrating security and political dimensions, in line with the evolution of transnational threats: piracy, terrorism, cyber-attacks, and regional instability (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012).

This cooperation is structured around two axes:

1. Maritime security and the fight against terrorism, particularly in strategic regions such as the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Guinea.
2. Support for peacekeeping operations, through the training of African forces, logistics, and the provision of non-lethal equipment.

China took a major step with the opening of a military base in Djibouti (Baker, 2022). It is also contributing to UN missions in Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and South Sudan (Lanteigne, 2019), while developing cybersecurity capabilities (Creemers, 2023).

Japan, traditionally reticent about any military involvement, launched the New Approach for Peace and Stability in Africa (NAPSA) program in 2020 to promote conflict prevention, institutional strengthening, and community dialogue (MOFA Japan, 2020).

India is banking on its tradition of post-colonial military solidarity, with joint training and regular contributions to UN peace operations. It values cooperation based on shared experience and the equality of partners (Soulé, 2019).

South Korea focuses its efforts on cybersecurity, police training, and the protection of civilians, with a human security approach.

Afro-Asian forums are thus no longer limited to development cooperation, but have become vehicles for regional stabilization, while respecting sovereignty and staying attentive to local priorities.

This dynamic is helping to reposition Africa as a normative player, capable of influencing the global security debate. Afro-Asian platforms are thus becoming diplomatic laboratories for the implementation of cooperative security, adapted to the continent's specific features.

5. Afro-Asian Platforms Between Future Strategic Convergence and Persistent Doctrinal Divergence

Analysis of the four major Afro-Asian cooperation platforms—the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the Tokyo International Conference on African Development, the India-Africa Forum Summit, and various Korean initiatives such as KOAF/KOAFEC—reveals distinct logics, linked to the geostrategic priorities and worldviews of their respective initiators. Each of these platforms reflects a singular approach to diplomacy, which sheds light on the intentions of each Asian power in relation to Africa.

FOCAC embodies China's far-reaching geo-economic ambitions, backed by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's approach is highly centralized in Beijing, and aims to strategically integrate Africa into its global infrastructure and trade network (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020). Japan, through TICAD, values multilateralism and promotes balanced, ethical partnerships geared towards sustainable development (Anyiam-Osigwe and Vreeland, 2024). India stands out for its rhetoric of South-South solidarity, highlighting a shared postcolonial memory with Africa (Chakrabarti, 2016). Finally, South Korea favors a technological and pragmatic

approach, focusing on innovation, capacity building, and vocational training (Matji, 2020).

The institutionalization of these cooperation frameworks also reflects varying levels of commitment. FOCAC and TICAD benefit from solid structures, with regular meeting cycles, operational follow-up mechanisms, and strong political support.

The case of South Korea presents a notable contrast: while KOAFEC, backed by the African Development Bank, benefits from a robust institutional structure, KOAFIC has suspended its activities since 2016, undermining the continuity of South Korean involvement in Africa. Only in 2024 was a new impetus given, with the organization of the first Korea-Africa Summit, a unifying initiative aimed at relaunching and restructuring Korean cooperation with the continent. The IAFS, meanwhile, suffers from a lack of a permanent structure. The irregularity of its summits since 2015 has limited its strategic scope.

Another major area of differentiation is financing methods and tools. China relies on considerable financial capacity, through a combination of preferential loans, subsidies, and investment funds (Brautigam, 2015), which strengthens its presence in key sectors such as infrastructure and natural resources. Japan, true to its principles of governance, favors public-private partnerships (PPPs), transparency, and project quality, notably via JICA (JICA, 2022b). India, while multiplying its lines of credit and educational initiatives, is finding it difficult to put certain commitments into practice, because of a lack of resources for effective follow-up. South Korea has adopted a targeted strategy, based on the use of trust funds and the implementation of joint projects with specific African institutions.

Thus, these platforms exhibit not only distinct models of South-South and hybrid North-South cooperation, but also show how each country projects its interests and adapts its

soft power to the African context. Ultimately, the diversity of these approaches provides Africa with strategic leeway, but also calls for greater continental coordination to optimize the benefits derived from these partnerships.

6. Afro-Asian Cooperation Models and African Ownership

An essential factor in assessing the various Afro-Asian cooperation platforms is the degree of African ownership. In this respect, TICAD and KOAF have taken significant steps forward by including the African Union (AU) as co-host of their summits. This institutional inclusion strengthens African legitimacy in decision-making processes, and consolidates the local anchoring of the strategies deployed.

However, one of the critical shortcomings in the involvement of the African Union Commission in cooperation platforms, notably with Japan through the TICAD framework, is persistent confusion between two complementary but distinct aspects: thematic ownership and organizational partnership. On several occasions, the Commission has tended to equate African involvement in defining priorities (thematic ownership) with a right to institutional co-piloting, or even a claim to organizational leadership of the entire process. This stance has given rise to tensions, notably whenever the Commission seeks to occupy a central position in the governance of the partnership, sometimes to the detriment of the driving role that should be retained by the state that initiates cooperation. This institutional shift raises the broader question of how to balance continental legitimacy with national initiative in the management of international partnerships. While continental coordination is essential to guarantee the strategic coherence of actions taken in Africa, it cannot replace the sovereignty of individual states in the conduct of their bilateral or multilateral relations. This calls for a clarification of the respective roles of the African Union Commission and member states in the architecture of Afro-Asian cooperation.

In contrast to the most inclusive Afro-Asian multilateral formats, FOCAC, although organized according to a highly centralized logic around Beijing, has over time developed mechanisms for consultation with African governments. In particular, this has led to the establishment of bilateral monitoring committees, aimed at adjusting Chinese projects to the national priorities and local realities of partner countries (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012). This mechanism is reinforced by an active African diplomatic corps in Beijing, which China has recognized and maintained as a structuring platform for coordination and dialogue, thus contributing to a hybrid form of bi-lateralized multilateralism.

In contrast to the more institutionalized approaches of some of its Asian counterparts, India is finding it difficult to fit the India-Africa Forum Summit into a truly integrated continental architecture. Since abandoning the Banjul format in 2015—a decision welcomed by many African players, who considered this format discriminatory because of its restricted selection logic—India has extended its diplomatic reach to all African states. However, this openness has not been accompanied by structuring mechanisms for consultation or coordination on a continental scale. Indian cooperation remains dominated by bilateral initiatives, often based on historical or symbolic affinities, which complicates its alignment with the collective strategic priorities defined by the African Union. The absence of a shared governance framework undermines the coherence and visibility of Indian action in Africa, while limiting African ownership of common agendas.

When it comes to sustainability and visibility, approaches differ greatly. FOCAC stands out as one of the most dynamic and well-resourced cooperation platforms. This capacity for action gives it considerable weight in China-African relations, particularly in relation to infrastructure and economic development. However, several questions have been

raised by observers and partners about the transparency of financing mechanisms, and the debt sustainability of certain African countries. These issues need to be analyzed in the light of national contexts and the range of engagement modalities between China and its African partners. Meanwhile, TICAD is distinguished by a strategic orientation aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's Agenda 2063. However, its long-term vision is occasionally undermined by diplomatic tensions or redefined geopolitical alliances.

The South Korean model, although less visible in the media, is remarkable for its pragmatism, flexibility, and targeted effectiveness, particularly in the technological and educational fields. As for India, institutionalization of IAFS will be essential to give it a lasting and credible dynamic. The creation of a permanent secretariat, coupled with a more robust communication strategy on results achieved, could enable New Delhi to strengthen its position in Africa and would lend more credibility to its cooperation approach (Singh et al, 2023).

In an international context marked by the gradual erosion of classical multilateralism, the rise of geostrategic rivalries, and the intensification of systemic vulnerabilities, whether related to security, climate, health, or finance, Afro-Asian cooperation platforms are emerging as resilient, adaptable, and increasingly complementary diplomatic instruments. Far from being static, they embody hybrid forms of interaction between states, driven by distinct but converging visions of transforming global governance.

These initiatives also reflect a transformation of Africa's role on the international stage: from mere beneficiary to co-architect of its partnerships. The growing involvement in governance and support mechanisms of the AU, the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), African universities, and think tanks

reflects a desire for strategic ownership. However, a number of structural challenges persist: the nationalist withdrawal of certain partners, institutional fragmentation on the African side, the absence of sustainable steering mechanisms in certain platforms, and the politicization of cooperation forums. These factors risk limiting the major roles these forums could play in the new, changing world order, by undermining their ability to produce a coherent, inclusive, and genuinely transformative vision of Afro-Asian relations. These constraints call for a reconfiguration of existing arrangements, based on more balanced governance, stronger articulation of African and Asian priorities, and deeper anchorage in emerging multilateral dynamics.

7. Challenges, Transformations, and Prospects for Afro-Asian Partnerships

The recent action plans of the Korea-Africa, FOCAC, and TICAD platforms reveal a significant strategic inflection in the way Asia views its partnership with Africa. The 2024 Korea-Africa Summit highlighted a vision centered on co-innovation, and digital and ecological resilience. FOCAC has renewed its proactive approach with a focus on energy transition, empowering African skills, and supporting SME ecosystems (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

TICAD reaffirms its multilateral approach. In the ministerial preparatory meeting for TICAD IX it emphasized its anchoring in Agenda 2063 and the SDGs, while repositioning Japan on issues of inclusive governance, public health, and global crisis management (MOFA, 2024).

These three initiatives converge on a common trend: they are no longer content to offer traditional bilateral support, but aim to become catalysts for systemic transformation. This

ambition is reflected in a growing willingness to move beyond top-down aid frameworks.

From this perspective, it is important to anchor these forums in governance configurations based on greater African inclusion. This means going beyond intergovernmental agreements to involve territorial and societal players including universities, local start-ups, civil society organizations, rural cooperatives, and chambers of commerce. These categories have considerable potential to catalyze endogenous innovation and ensure contextualized program implementation. More decentralized governance would foster greater local ownership, reduce informational asymmetries, and reinforce the sustainability of the actions taken.

This inclusion must not be symbolic, but structured, for example, by systematically integrating representatives of these players into monitoring committees, evaluation mechanisms, and even the co-drafting of sectoral roadmaps. Experiences from TICAD's multi-stakeholder panels, and Korean public-private partnerships through KOAF and KOAFEC, illustrate the feasibility of such hybrid and participative models.

The transition to a structural and technological partnership cannot be effective without massive investment in the mastery of critical skills. Africa's future will depend largely on its ability to become not just a beneficiary, but a sovereign player in emerging technologies. With this in mind, cybersecurity, digital health, artificial intelligence systems, and green technologies should be the key areas for enhanced cooperation. These areas are at the crossroads of security, development, and digital sovereignty.

Korea, through initiatives such as Tech4Africa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 2024), has already sketched out such a direction, supporting digital infrastructures, coding training, and connectivity. China is

banking on integrated industrial value chains and joint technology hubs to foster skills development. Japan, via TICAD, has put the spotlight on STEM education, in line with regional needs for climate adaptation and resilient healthcare systems (TICAD, 2022). What remains to be done, however, is to pool these efforts into a coherent, coordinated vision that can be rolled out at local level.

At the same time, the success of lasting Afro-Asian cooperation requires the structured trilateral dialogue to be consolidated. The Africa-Asia-International Institutions triangle, far from being a mere diplomatic arrangement, could become a strategic lever for converging agendas, pooling resources, and stabilizing geopolitics. Tripartite mechanisms should encourage coherence between aid policies, trade logics, and human security objectives.

This integrated approach would help to avoid the fragmentation of initiatives and prevent the redundancy of projects. Technical support from UN agencies, the flexibility of Asian funding, and the institutional dynamics of African regional organizations, such as the African Union and ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), could, in synergy, generate more coherent, agile, and resilient regional responses. This tripolar framework could also strengthen Africa's collective negotiating power in multilateral arenas, capitalizing on the diversity of South-South partnerships.

The scale and complexity of today's risks—be they health, climate, or security-related—render obsolete the compartmentalized intervention frameworks inherited from the past. It is now essential to move towards a systemic resilience approach, which goes beyond sectoral logics to integrate interdependent vulnerabilities into a coherent strategy. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, 2015), and the OECD-FAO recommendations (OECD, 2022), converge to call for risk governance anchored in prevention, adaptation, and sustainability.

Africa can no longer simply react to external shocks. Its partnerships must enable it to build integrated local monitoring, warning, and response architectures that combine climate, health, and food security, and territorial governance. Inaction or fragmented responses are no longer viable. This strategic shift calls for Afro-Asian platforms to go beyond the stage of mere seasonal economic gatherings, to become genuine catalysts for strategic learning, with a sustainable, forward-looking vision.

Although fragmentary, these dynamics suggest that Afro-Asian cooperation is poised to become one of the most fertile laboratories for geopolitical innovation in the twenty-first century. Provided they move beyond the fixed frameworks of bilateral relations, and implement principles of reciprocity, transparency, and local anchoring, platforms such as the Korea-Africa Summit, FOCAC, and TICAD could play pioneering roles in redefining post-hegemonic international relations.

Afro-Asian cooperation can no longer be seen as a simple counterweight to transatlantic or Eurocentric dynamics. It should become the expression of a plural strategic realignment, in which the countries of the South assert their own priorities, narratives, and instruments of projection. The aim is no longer simply to receive solutions, but to construct them, in a spirit of equality and shared innovation. This rethinking of partnerships depends less on the amounts allocated or on declarative promises, than on the collective ability to redefine the very purposes of cooperation. Africa, as an area of geopolitical experimentation, can impose a demanding vision of partnership: no longer based on assistance, but on mutual responsibility, cooperative sovereignty, and the joint transformation of development models.

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