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**Triangular Partnerships:**  
A Preferred Modality for  
a World in Crisis?

Editor:

**Malancho Chakrabarty**



**WILEY**







# **Triangular Partnerships:** A Preferred Modality for a World in Crisis?

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# Editor's Note

Malancha Chakrabarty

**T**he world is reeling under multiple crises, and global economic prospects are grim. According to the World Bank's projections, growth in 2024 and 2025 will be slower than in the decade before COVID-19 due to sluggish trade and investments (1). Much of the developing world is mired in debt, with nearly 52 percent of low-income countries facing debt distress or high risk of debt distress (2). Five years before the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) deadline, the world is experiencing a reversal of many of the hard-won development gains of previous years. Climate risks are expanding, and developing countries—the least responsible for the climate crisis—are the most severely impacted. Additionally, geopolitical rivalries and conflicts within and between nations are exacerbating economic instability and undermining collective efforts to address climate change and attain the SDGs.

Triangular cooperation, a development modality in place since the 1970s, offers many advantages in today's fractured, conflicted, and unsustainable world. Given the complex crisis that the world is currently facing, expanding partnerships beyond existing alliances and adopting new approaches to development diplomacy to harness resources and know-how from all partners is the need of the hour. A recent report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Islamic Development Bank stresses that triangular partnerships can effectively win influence with key strategic partners in a divided and conflicted world (3). Further, triangular cooperation is a powerful platform for technical diplomacy as it allows many state and non-state actors across countries to collaborate to create innovative development solutions (4).

Triangular cooperation refers to projects and initiatives combining the comparative advantages of traditional donors and southern countries to share knowledge and address development concerns in developing countries (5). As per the OECD definition, triangular cooperation involves three actors:

- *Beneficiary partner/recipient country*: a developing country that seeks support to address a particular development problem.
- *Pivotal partner*: a developing country or developing country institution with proven experience in the concerned area that will share its knowledge, expertise, and resources to address the problem.
- *Facilitating partner*: the developed country or international agency providing technical and financial support to collaborate between the beneficiary and pivotal partners.

Triangular partnerships have witnessed a revival in recent years for two reasons. Firstly, the Western charity-based development aid model, with strict hierarchies between donors and recipients, was completely discredited by the early 2000s while the chorus for reform grew louder. Secondly, emerging donors like China, India, and Brazil expanded their development



cooperation programmes and approaches based on equal partnership and mutual benefit, finding favour with many recipient countries. The West was losing leverage in the developing world and was concerned about the rise of China, which had the largest development cooperation budget and was also increasingly viewed as a threat by the West. As such, partnering with other countries like India became imperative for many Western countries.

Triangular cooperation has several advantages: (i) it combines the best features of North–South and South–South cooperation, (ii) it contributes to the SDGs, (iii) it enables more efficient development delivery through resource pooling, co-creation, and the best available technology, (iv) it strengthens relations between the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors and southern development actors, and (v) it builds the capacity of developing countries as providers of development cooperation (6). However, delivering development through triangular cooperation is often fraught with challenges, and there are many drawbacks: administrative costs and transaction costs are high, the success rate is low, the scale and scope of the projects are limited, there are significant delays in implementation, and partner countries often differ over procurement rules, financial structure, and legal framework (7). Moreover, recipient countries often hesitate to participate in triangular partnerships (8).

Although data on triangular cooperation are not easily accessible, OECD estimates suggest that between 2000 and 2022, 199 countries and territories and 85 international and regional organisations engaged in over 1,000 triangular cooperation projects (9). About 68 percent of these projects were below US\$1 million in value, providing low-cost, flexible development solutions, and about 47 percent of the projects have a two- to four-year lifespan (10). Nearly 46 percent of the triangular projects globally involve a non-state actor (11).

India ranks eighth among the top ten countries involved in triangular partnerships (12). In 1957, it participated in a triangular road construction project with the US and Nepal, its first such engagement (13). However, in

the subsequent years, it focused on shaping its development cooperation strategy based on third-world solidarity, respect for sovereignty, demand-driven development, and mutual benefit. India was also a vocal critic of the DAC donors' approach to development aid, which made recipient countries more dependent on the developed world. Over the years, India's disinclination towards partnering with Western countries diminished as it established its credentials as a development actor, and the negative perceptions of China grew stronger (14). Since 2014, India has signed several agreements on triangular partnerships with the US, UK, Japan, and many other countries.

This volume, comprising nine essays, explores India's experience as a partner in the triangular format with leading international development actors, including the United Nations (UN). The first essay by Shailly Kedia focuses on India's triangular partnerships with the UN, India's oldest and most trusted partner. She asserts that India's triangular partnership with the UN is emblematic of the country's larger goal of supporting the countries of the Global South. However, the scale of such projects is relatively small; as such, this modality is best suited for smaller developing countries. In the next essay, Shreya Upadhyay and Vivek Mishra list several successful triangular development initiatives between India and the US, particularly those involving Indian civil society organisations. However, they also find key differences between Indian and US motives and capacities. Therefore, the success of India-US triangular cooperation efforts will be determined by how well India balances its relationship with other developing countries while maintaining close ties with the US.

Next, Swati Prabhu discusses India's engagement with the UK under the triangular partnership model and its challenges and prospects. Pratinashree Basu and Raka Barman focus on India's triangular partnerships with Japan through four case studies: Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Africa. The authors argue that India and Japan are united by a shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific, and third countries largely welcome India-Japan partnerships, particularly in the infrastructure sector. However,

there are significant challenges due to political instability in partner countries and differing diplomatic stances between Japan and India.

In her essay, Ankita Dutta asserts that the India-European Union triangular partnership has not yet reached its potential and argues for enhanced cooperation in third countries, notably in Africa. Next, Alisée Pernet notes that triangular development cooperation is a valuable development modality for India and France to achieve the SDGs by using complementary strengths, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, a region extremely vulnerable to climate change and of common interest to both countries. She focuses on three key examples of triangular development cooperation between the two countries: the Indo-Pacific Triangular Cooperation Fund, Indo-Pacific Park Partnerships, and Sustainable Finance in the Indo-Pacific.

Similarly, Kate Clayton and Ambika Vishwanath emphasise the role of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, which is both extremely climate-vulnerable and highly contested. They argue for closer cooperation in clean energy and infrastructure, disaster response, and water security.

The final two essays focus on India's triangular partnerships in the infrastructure and health sectors, two prominent areas of partnership. Gurjit Singh observes that China's growing footprint, particularly in the infrastructure sector in Africa, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the South Pacific, has made it imperative for the G7 countries to engage with India, a democratic country with shared values. However, triangular partnerships in infrastructure are not smooth processes. Singh outlines several recommendations for successful triangular partnerships: greater flexibility, a hybrid financing system, coordination in procurement processes, and guarantees to mitigate risks. The last essay by Lakshmy Ramakrishnan concentrates on India's triangular partnerships in the health sector. She highlights India's successful triangular partnerships with specialised UN agencies in health, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and states that global health challenges require sustained multidimensional collaborative approaches. Ramakrishnan recommends

systematically monitoring and evaluating health projects steered by India to enhance the health sector in developing economies.

Triangular partnerships cannot replace other forms of development cooperation, such as South-South or bilateral cooperation. However, it can be an important link between developed countries, international agencies, and southern countries and help harness the best resources, knowledge, and technology for sustainable development. I hope this collection will generate discussions on the efficacy of triangular partnerships as a development modality, particularly for developing countries like India, encourage partnerships between countries in achieving the SDGs, and enable an environment for triangular development to mature to a level where project sizes are large and delays are few.

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## Endnotes

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# Assessing India's Triangular Cooperation with the United Nations

Shailly Kedia

**T**riangular cooperation can be understood as “Southern-driven partnerships between two or more developing countries supported by a developed country(ies)/or multilateral organization(s) to implement development cooperation programmes and projects” (1).

Developing countries can gain skills and knowledge from peer countries with similar developmental experiences through triangular cooperation. This peer-to-peer learning fosters a sense of solidarity and understanding that traditional North-South bilateral or multilateral aid frameworks may not always provide (2, 3, 4). Triangular cooperation focuses on enhancing South-South collaboration while incorporating the expertise of or funding by a developed country or a multilateral organisation such as the United Nations (UN). The modality can also support small island

developing states (SIDS) affected by climate change and natural disasters. Typically, triangular cooperation results in resource pooling, knowledge sharing, and technical cooperation to address developmental challenges in the Global South. The UN plays a crucial role in triangular cooperation by providing institutional support, technical expertise, and coordination mechanisms that ensure the successful implementation of projects. The UN also facilitates knowledge-sharing between countries, ensuring that best practices are replicated and scaled up.

The history of triangular cooperation in development cooperation involving the UN is closely linked to the broader framework of South-South cooperation, which was driven by several key developments within the UN. In 1949, the UN Economic and Social Council laid the foundation by initiating its first technical aid programme. Later, in 1955, the Bandung Conference united newly independent African and Asian countries, establishing the Afro-Asian Group. By 1964, the creation of the UN Conference on Trade and Development led to the formation of the Group of 77 coalition to promote economic cooperation among developing nations (5). A pivotal moment came in 1972 when the UN General Assembly set up a working group on technical cooperation among developing countries, which was formalised in 1974 by establishing a special unit within the UN Development Programme (UNDP). This marked the institutionalisation of South-South cooperation within the UN framework. The Buenos Aires Plan of Action (BAPA) of 1978 was instrumental in shaping future triangular cooperation and identifying key areas for technical support, particularly for least-developed countries. Notably, triangular cooperation gained further momentum with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11).

### **Triangular Cooperation Involving India and the UN**

The UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), established in 1974 under the UNDP, promotes and coordinates South-South and triangular cooperation globally (12). It provides policy, advisory, and consulting

services to member states and other UN entities, supporting developing countries in addressing development challenges and leveraging global opportunities. As the secretariat of the High-Level Committee on South-South Cooperation, the UNOSSC monitors progress and implements key action plans like BAPA and BAPA+40 (in 2017, the UN General Assembly decided to convene a high-level conference on South-South cooperation to mark the 40th anniversary of BAPA. The Second High-level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation was held in Buenos Aires in March 2019). It manages several trust funds, including the IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) Fund, the Pérez-Guerrero Trust Fund, and the India-UN Development Partnership Fund. It offers monitoring, quality assurance, and knowledge-management support for South-South cooperation projects.

Although the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has an archived repository of triangular cooperation projects (13), scant data is available on triangular cooperation involving India and the UN (see Table 1 for triangular cooperation initiatives by the UN and its organisations).

**Table 1: Triangular Cooperation Initiatives by the UN and its Organisations and India (2002–2022)**

Entity	Number of initiatives	Percentage of the combined number of initiatives per UN entity
UN Development Programme	64	23.6
UN Food and Agriculture Organization	28	10.3
World Food Programme	21	7.7
World Bank	18	6.6
UN Office for South-South Cooperation	15	5.5
UNICEF	13	4.8
UN Industrial Development Organization	13	4.8
International Labour Organization	12	4.4
UN Tourism	12	4.4



Entity	Number of initiatives	Percentage of the combined number of initiatives per UN entity
World Health Organization	9	3.3
International Fund for Agricultural Development	7	2.6
UN Population Fund	7	2.6
UN Environment Programme	6	2.2
UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	6	2.2
International Trade Centre	4	1.5
UN	3	1.1
UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific	3	1.1
UN Office on Drugs and Crime	3	1.1
UN Volunteers	3	1.1
UN Women	3	1.1
Other UN entities	Less than 3	7.8
Total	271	100

Source: Haug and Weinlich (14) and OECD (15).

Triangular cooperation initiatives involving India and UN entities (listed in Table 1) span sectors, including social, energy, education, agriculture, and health. For instance, India has partnered with the International Labour Organization (ILO) on initiatives to address global labour issues. Another initiative focused on social protection mechanisms in Togo involved India, Brazil, and Togo, alongside the UNDP and the ILO, facilitating the exchange of experiences on social protection.

In the energy sector, India's collaboration with the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) has focused on promoting waste-to-energy technologies. India has worked with Myanmar to demonstrate biomass gasification technology in the rice milling sector. A similar initiative in Uganda aimed at building capacity in biomass gasification technology to improve access to clean energy. Through the UNOSSC, India

has been part of initiatives focused on education and training. These efforts, supported by South Korea and other international organisations, aim to build capacity in science and technology for poverty reduction. India's participation extends across multiple countries in Asia and Africa.

India has also contributed to rice fortification efforts in collaboration with the World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF, and the World Health Organization (WHO). India has provided wheat to Afghanistan, which was processed into fortified biscuits to support nutrition programmes for schoolchildren. In the health sector, India has collaborated with UNAIDS, the US, and Indonesia on the SHARE Project to facilitate the transfer of innovations to prevent and control the spread of HIV/AIDS, establish telemedicine systems to track treatment adherence, and build the capacity of healthcare professionals.

### Triangular Cooperation Initiative with India as a Major Player

India has two major triangular cooperation initiatives involving the UN: the IBSA Fund and the India-UN Development Partnership Fund (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Key Triangular Cooperation Initiatives Involving India and the UN**

Highlights	IBSA Fund	India-UN Development Partnership Fund
Establishment Year	2004 (Operational since 2006)	2017
Primary Objective	Alleviate poverty and hunger through South-South cooperation	Support sustainable development projects in the Global South
Key Partners	India, Brazil, South Africa	India and various developing countries with UN agencies
Funding Structure	Each country contributes US\$1 million annually	India committed US\$150 million over ten years
Implementation Mechanism	Managed by UNOSSC, projects are demand-driven	Managed by UNOSSC; implemented by UN agencies
Focus Areas	Food security, health, education, capacity building	Climate resilience, health, education, infrastructure

Highlights	IBSA Fund	India-UN Development Partnership Fund
Project Examples	Rural electrification in Belize, agriculture in South Sudan	Healthcare infrastructure projects in Haiti
Geographical Focus	Primarily developing countries in the Global South	Least developed countries and small island developing states

Source: Author's own.

The IBSA Fund, which was established in 2004 and became operational in 2006, supports projects on a demand-driven basis through partnerships with local governments, national institutions, and implementing partners. The fund is managed by the UNOSSC, with India, Brazil, and South Africa each contributing US\$1 million annually. It aims to support countries in achieving the SDGs and, as such, is involved in projects such as promoting food security, addressing HIV/AIDS, extending access to safe drinking water, and promoting quality education and gender equality. However, the projects do not cover SDG-14 related to life below water (see Table 3). The fund has implemented 42 projects worth US\$46.73 million across 35 countries (16). Of this, around 45 percent has been allocated to projects in Africa, 22 percent to Latin America and the Caribbean, 19 percent to Asia-Pacific, 12 percent to Arab states, and 2 percent globally (17).

Table 3: Key IBSA Fund Projects

Country	SDGs Covered	Project
Haiti	SDGs 1, 4, 8, 11, 16	Collecting solid waste as a tool to reduce violence (Phases I and II)
Saint Lucia	SDGs 1, 9	Reducing poverty through livestock development
Grenada	SDGs 3, 4, 17	Supporting national health insurance scheme
Guyana	SDGs 6, 11, 12	Solid waste management improvement
Bolivia	SDGs 2, 6, 17	Increasing access to water for consumption and hygiene, improved livestock production and post-drought food security

Country	SDGs Covered	Project
Cabo Verde	SDGs 3, 5, 9, 17	Delivering safe drinking water
Senegal	SDGs 2, 13, 15	Restoring and monitoring of degraded land in the groundnut basin of the Saloum Delta
Guinea-Bissau	SDGs 1, 2, 4, 7, 17	Developing agricultural and small-animal herding (Project I); agricultural development and services to rural communities (Project II)
Sierra Leone	SDGs 1, 5, 16, 17	Digital financial services
State of Palestine	SDG 3, 10	Supporting programme opportunities in recreational and team sports
Sudan	SDGs 4, 8	Creation of job opportunities for youth in Sudan through labour-intensive work opportunities
Burundi	SDGs 3, 5, 17	Strengthening infrastructure and capacity to combat AIDS
Comoros	SDGs 2, 12, 15, 17	Enhancing agricultural capacity
Zambia	SDGs 1, 2	Leveraging agro-industry potential in rural areas through enhanced soya bean production and processing
Malawi and Zambia	SDGs 4, 5, 17	Eliminating child marriages and offering scholarships to child-marriage survivors
Eswatini	SDGs 4, 6, 11	Addressing the water, health, and poverty Nexus through WASH initiatives for COVID-19 and climate responses
Lesotho	SDGs 1, 2, 6	No information
Laos	SDGs 2, 15	Supporting integrated irrigated agriculture in two districts in Bolikhamxay
Cambodia	SDGs 3, 4, 17	Empowering children and adolescents with special needs and their families
Vietnam	SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4	Establishing a rice-seed production hub
Kiribati	SDGs 2, 5, 17	Enhancing inclusive sustainable economic development through coconut sector development

Source: UNOSCC (18).

The India-UN Development Partnership Fund, established in 2017, is a collaborative effort between the Indian government and the UN system. The fund collaborates with 12 UN entities as its implementing partners,

including the ILO, UNDP, WHO, UNICEF, WFP, Food and Agriculture Organization, Pan American Health Organization, and the UN Capital Development Fund. The fund supports demand-driven, Southern-led sustainable development projects across the Global South, particularly in least-developed countries (LDCs) and SIDS. With a commitment of US\$150 million over 10 years, the fund addresses key global challenges such as climate resilience, renewable energy, health, and education, aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (see Table 4). However, the projects do not cover SDG-10 (reduced inequalities), SDG-12 (responsible consumption and production), and SDG-14 (life below water). The fund's operations are governed by the principles of national ownership, mutual benefit, and sustainability, with proposals submitted through diplomatic channels for approval. It has implemented 66 projects worth US\$52 million across 51 countries. Of these projects, about 23 percent are in Africa, 32 percent in Asia-Pacific, and 42 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean. This wide geographical reach highlights the fund's commitment to promoting sustainable development across diverse contexts, addressing the unique needs of countries in these regions (19).

**Table 4: Key India-UN Development Partnership Fund Projects**

Country	SDGs Covered	Project
Grenada	SDG 3	New incinerator for the general hospital
The Bahamas	SDG 17	Strengthening public-debt management framework and developing the government bond market
Haiti	SDG 6	Improving access to water through the installation of a solar pumping system
Belize	SDG 11	Strengthening clinical management of COVID-19 patients and reducing transmission risk among health workers
Guyana	SDG 3	Reducing adolescent pregnancy
Bolivia	SDG 1	Social Innovation Hubs for labour-market insertion and early-childhood women's care
Saint Kitts and Nevis	SDG 3	Ensuring adequate personal protective equipment for the government's COVID-19 response
Nicaragua	SDG 4	Strengthening institutional capacities for the successful integration of children with disabilities into the education system

Country	SDGs Covered	Project
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	SDG 3	Modernising arrowroot industry
Dominica	SDG 1	Strengthening sustainable livelihoods and resilience
Saint Lucia	SDG 4	Upgrading capacity to provide impactful vocational training for marginalised youth
Barbados	SDG 8	Project to develop local content
Burkina Faso	SDG 6	Mobilising and valuing surface water
Trinidad and Tobago	SDG 3	Bringing high and low technology to COVID-19
Togo	SDG 15	Tackling biodiversity loss in Fazao-Malfakassa National Park
Paraguay	SDG 5	Preventing adolescent pregnancy and early marriages through an intersectoral approach
Moldova	SDG 16	Improving availability of administrative data for tracking progress
Zimbabwe	SDGs 1, 2, 5, 7	Building resilience of small farmers by increasing small-grain production and productivity while improving market access
Malawi	SDG 1	Resolving the identification barrier for financial inclusion among rural populations, women and youth
Mozambique	SDG 9	Restoring pivotal public infrastructure for the recovery and sustainable development of the country
Zambia	SDG 8	Empowering women and youth with increased access to the use of digital payment for utilities and health services
Cameroon	SDG 7	Scaling up rural households' use of renewable energy-efficient technologies
Solomon Islands	SDG 3	Supporting COVID-19 response
Micronesia	SDG 3	Strengthening national gender machinery
Kiribati	SDG 3	Supporting COVID-19 response
Samoa	SDG 4	Developing the Samoa Knowledge Society Initiative
Tonga	SDGs 3, 11	Supporting COVID-19 response, and the repair and reconstruction of export buildings and immigration facility
Tuvalu	SDG 7	Developing solar home standalone systems

Country	SDGs Covered	Project
Palau	SDG 13	Building resilience: improving the community health centre and strengthening national capacities to address the COVID-19 crisis

Source: Based on UNOSCC (20).

## India's Vision of Triangular Cooperation with the UN

At its core, triangular cooperation is more than just a strategic collaboration; it is a battlefield of ideas, values, and power structures that define the current and future landscape of global politics. In the grand theatre of international relations, triangular cooperation between India and the UN offers a compelling narrative that reshapes the traditional understanding of development cooperation, global governance, and the redistribution of power in the world order.

The roots of triangular cooperation are deeply embedded in the quest for a multipolar world, a vision that acknowledges the diminishing dominance of traditional Western powers and the rise of emerging countries. For India, a country that has positioned itself as a champion of Global South issues, triangular cooperation serves as both a vehicle and a statement of intent. It allows India to collaborate with its peers in the Global South and with multilateral institutions like the UN, constructing an alternative framework for development cooperation. For instance, the India-UN Development Partnership Fund model reveals that India is the funder while the UN provides technical management.

Triangular cooperation between India, the UN, and other developing countries exemplifies this. The UN acts as a multilateral platform, enabling states like India to contribute to global initiatives addressing issues such as poverty, climate change, and security. This cooperation is not born out of altruism alone; it is also a recognition of shared interests and mutual gains. As a rational actor, India understands that its long-term strategic interests are better served by fostering cooperation.

### Challenging Hegemonic Structures

Triangular cooperation models involving India and the UN also reject the old donor-recipient dichotomy that has historically defined development aid, particularly in the postcolonial context. Initiatives like the IBSA Fund and the India-UN Development Partnership Fund are emblematic of India's larger goal: challenging the hierarchical structures that have long marginalised the Global South. India's involvement in such initiatives can be seen as an act of ideological defiance against the dependency paradigms of North-South cooperation.

India is expressing solidarity in shared struggles and futures by supporting other developing countries—whether through direct aid or collaborative development projects. The goal is to build a self-reliant, sustainable, and inclusive development model without the historical baggage of exploitation and domination. India's participation in triangular cooperation can be seen as a resistance towards hegemonic structures that have long dominated global governance.

### The Soft Power of Cooperation Beyond UN Peacekeeping

For India, triangular cooperation is also deeply tied to identity—how it sees itself and wishes to be seen on the global stage as a *vishwaguru* (global teacher) (21). Constructivism offers a way to understand the role of norms, ideas, and identity in shaping India's actions. In the realm of triangular cooperation, India is not just a participant but a leader. India has positioned itself as a bridge between the developed and developing worlds, facilitating dialogue and collaboration across these divides.

By emphasising non-coercive forms of influence—whether through development cooperation or peacekeeping—India can project itself as a moral leader, a country seeking partnership rather than domination. At the same time, soft power and public diplomacy provide an additional layer of understanding. India's extensive involvement in triangular cooperation initiatives allows it to build goodwill with partner countries



and the international community at large. The narrative that India is a benevolent power, willing to share its resources and expertise to uplift others, is central to its diplomatic strategy.

India's involvement in UN peacekeeping operations is a powerful manifestation of this identity. It is one of the most significant contributors to UN peacekeeping forces, and this commitment is not just about enhancing India's soft power but also about living up to an ideal. India sees itself as a custodian of global peace and stability, a role it plays with pride and responsibility. Its peacekeeping missions testify to its broader philosophy of non-alignment and peaceful coexistence, values that have historically shaped its foreign policy. Through these actions, India seeks to project itself as a responsible global actor, one that is committed to upholding international norms and contributing to the global common good.

### Realpolitik in a Cooperative World

However, one cannot entirely dismiss the role of traditional power politics in triangular cooperation. Realism suggests that India's participation in these initiatives is partly motivated by its desire to enhance its soft power, gain strategic footholds in key regions, and secure its place as a global power. Although triangular cooperation appears to be an exercise in multilateralism and mutual gain, it is also a strategic move by India to enhance its influence in the Global South and on the global stage through the UN. Through its active participation in peacekeeping, development funds, and other triangular initiatives, India is helping others and itself. By contributing to global peace and development, India strengthens its international standing, making it a more attractive partner for other countries and increasing its leverage in multilateral forums like the UN.

### **Conclusion**

Triangular cooperation is not without its challenges. The volume of funding reported as disbursed through triangular cooperation has increased over

time but remains relatively low compared to other development finance flows (22). The scale of projects is usually small, and scalability poses a challenge. Limited resources or political constraints may curtail their ability to grow, preventing these initiatives from scaling up. Coordination can be another hurdle because managing projects involves communication and synchronising efforts. Sustainability is another concern, where ensuring that projects maintain momentum after the initial funding phase is a common challenge, particularly in regions where institutional capacities are weak. There is an absence of triangular cooperation projects related to SDG-14 (life below water), presenting an opportunity for improvement, especially given that many Global South countries are coastal or heavily reliant on oceans for trade, economic activities, and livelihoods.

India is expected to continue its active involvement in UN partnerships while expanding its bilateral development cooperation since it enhances its stature as a pivotal player in international development discourse. India's participation in initiatives like the IBSA Fund and India-UN Development Partnership Fund goes beyond the traditional soft power attributed to smaller countries, namely through peacekeeping triangular cooperation. Triangular cooperation involving India and the UN is a complex interplay of power, identity, and ideology that speaks to the broader dynamics of international cooperation. India's engagement in triangular cooperation through the UN reflects its evolving role in multilateralism and global governance processes. It is simultaneously a defender of Global South solidarity, a challenger of Western hegemony, a builder of soft power, and a realist actor pursuing national interests.

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# The Triangular Cooperation Factor in India-US Relations

Shreya Upadhyay and Vivek Mishra

**T**riangular cooperation is a key mechanism to nurture developmental partnerships at the international level. It aims to encourage project ownership, deal with corruption, improve institutions, use local systems, and measure results while simplifying procedures and creating accountability over development issues and goals. India has contributed immensely to international development, particularly in areas like microfinance and providing low-cost medications (1). During the COVID-19 pandemic, India donated millions of vaccines to developing countries, reflecting the spirit of South-South and triangular cooperation (2). Such efforts aided the immediate pandemic response and strengthened long-term healthcare resilience in these emerging regions and economies. Further, India has shown promise in climate and energy innovation, making it a pivotal partner for countries in Asia, the Indo-Pacific, and Africa, where Indian

technologies can be adapted locally (3). Notably, India is the second most active partner in triangular cooperation projects with African countries (after Norway) (4). Indeed, African nations have embraced triangular cooperation, partnering with countries in the Indo-Pacific region and Europe with policy experiences and innovations (5).

### India-US Triangular Cooperation

India's rising economic prowess and its new status as a net aid provider have allowed it to partner with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries on an equal footing (6). India has been involved in numerous triangular development cooperation projects since independence (7). India's earliest engagement in the triangular format was in the 1950s when it partnered with the US and Canada for development projects in Nepal (8). Over the years, it played a leading role in developing partnerships by extending lines of credit and capacity-building initiatives. In recent years, India's relationship with the US has shifted from a donor-recipient dynamic to that of strategic partners, with the US recognising that India's expertise and indigenous technologies are key to addressing global development challenges (9).

Notable examples of partnership between India and the US include the Bhagwan Mahaveer Viklang Sahayata Samiti working with Stanford University to create low-cost prosthetic legs (the Jaipur foot) (10), and The Energy and Resources Institute, an Indian civil society organisation, partnering with the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and other global institutions to scale affordable clean energy solutions in countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Mexico, and Brazil (11).

In 2014, India and the US signed the 'Statement of Guiding Principles on Triangular Cooperation for Global Development' (SGP) (12), under which they have launched numerous successful projects in vulnerable nations in Asia and Africa. That same year, the two sides articulated a joint vision, 'Chalein Saath Saath: Forward Together We Go', which served as a manual

on collaboration for global stability and job-led growth over the following decade (13). India-US triangular cooperation was deepened in 2015 under the 'Sanjha Prayas, Sabka Vikas: Shared Effort, Progress for All' concept (14) to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals (15, 16).

The SGP was renewed in 2021 until 2026, focusing on promoting climate adaptation strategies and green technologies, creating frameworks for carbon trading, and supporting climate finance mechanisms to help low- and middle-income countries transition to low-carbon economies; strengthening health systems globally in the post-pandemic phase; addressing the rising burden of non-communicable diseases (diabetes, heart diseases, cancer) in developing countries; and improving digital connectivity in e-governance and e-skilling. The SGP has evolved in response to new global challenges to include aspects of nutrition, disaster preparedness, water, sanitation, education and institution-building (17). It also expands the scope of joint capacity-building activities and provides a consultative mechanism for the joint biannual monitoring and review of activities.

In 2016, USAID collaborated with the National Institute of Agricultural Extension to train over 1,500 agricultural practitioners in 17 African and Asian countries on specialised farming practices to boost productivity and income under the Feed the Future India Triangular Training Programme (18). The programme's first phase, which ran between 2013 and 2015, trained 219 participants from Kenya, Liberia, and Malawi in agricultural marketing, dairy management, food processing, and other best practices to prevent post-harvest losses (19). The Agriculture Innovation Partnership (AIP) programme by USAID, started in 2011, has collaborated with three Indian universities (Banaras Hindu University, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel University of Agriculture and Technology, and Assam Agricultural University) to adopt state-of-the-art agricultural education curricula, including extension management training programmes. AIP aims to prepare a market-ready workforce and promote new innovative technologies in agriculture, such as adopting drought-resistant crops, improved irrigation techniques, and efficient water use. The programme is now being replicated in Nepal at

the Agriculture and Forestry University and in Malawi at the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Similarly, the Feed the Future India Africa Innovation Transfer Platform shares India's soil and water management techniques in Kenya and Malawi, improving off-season crop production and water access. Along with other programmes, USAID supports transferring agricultural technologies such as Bullet Santi tractor attachments and Seed Dibblers to Kenya, improving productivity for over one million households in India and Kenya (20). Additionally, through the India-Kenya Dairy Innovation Bridge Programme, USAID is helping pilot India's smallholder dairy model in Kenya, boosting milk production by over 50 percent in the target communities (21).

In healthcare, USAID's Global Linkages project (started in 2016) facilitates the transfer of Indian health innovations and best practices in family planning and maternal and child health to select African and Asian countries. Based in India, the project tests and scales both public and private sector solutions and has mapped 50 promising healthcare innovations (22). Kenya and Bangladesh want to adopt India's emergency medical transport system and health insurance management practices. Other potential partner countries, based on health indicators and cross-learning opportunities, include Angola, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda. There have also been collaborations for HIV/AIDS prevention and control, such as transferring monitoring systems or developing telemedicine (23). Similarly, in Fiji, the partnership focuses on telemedicine and psychosocial care. The initiative seeks to strengthen Fiji's ability to provide mental health support and emergency care, particularly in disaster and post-disaster settings (24).

India and the US also collaborated in Afghanistan to train over 3,000 Afghan women in vocational and marketing skills to promote economic self-sufficiency. The two countries have run programmes in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Nigeria, and Indonesia to train women entrepreneurs in clean energy technologies, such as solar lanterns and cookstoves (25). In Tanzania, the US and India are leveraging their capacities, resulting in a stronger grid, improved regulatory and policy frameworks, reliable



regional interconnections, and the development of utility-scale solar projects. USAID is partnering with India's centres of excellence, including the Grid Controller of India Limited and NTPC School of Business, to engage Tanzania's policymakers, regulators, utilities, academia, and the private sector to expand the use of renewable energy in the country and promote climate-smart energy investments (26).

Triangular cooperation can play a critical role in allowing India and countries in the developing world to accelerate their climate transitions by easing bottlenecks in technology and knowledge transfer for appropriate and cost-effective solutions (27). USAID's South Asia Regional Initiative for Energy Integration promotes cross-border electricity trade through transmission links between Bangladesh, Nepal, and India. It conducts capacity-building exercises in designing, managing, and operating a power trading entity (28).

Private companies and organisations also play a critical role in India-US trilateral cooperation by contributing innovation, technology, investment, and operational efficiency. Even though the foreign direct investment from Indian companies in Africa may not match the scale of investments by other global partners, their involvement remains strong and consistent. Indian companies tend to make long-term commitments and are key to technology transfers, local job creation, and minimising the reliance on expatriates (29). Private organisations (such as Sankalp Africa, the Avishkar-Africa, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) have initiated trilateral collaboration efforts in infrastructure, start-ups and social enterprises, consulting, healthcare, and capacity building (30).

## Challenges and Limitations

Involving a Southern partner country in development initiatives spearheaded by a developed country can increase the bargaining power of recipient countries. However, donor countries' priorities and agendas may often overshadow recipient countries' interests. Traditional donors usually focus more on strengthening their relationships with emerging donors, while the

central country in the partnership may prioritise enhancing its political and economic ties with traditional donors. Moreover, these partnerships are often constrained by high administrative and transaction costs and limitations in scale and scope (31).

The ambitions of the India-US trilateral partnership continue to grow, from Asia to Africa, with a broadening agenda that includes food security and nutrition, access to quality healthcare, women empowerment and clean energy (32). However, while there have been some success stories, the triangular cooperation model has not been widely adopted, and many projects are small-scale, lack long-term sustainability, and face funding constraints (33). The vision for these initiatives often outpaces their actual execution (34). India usually struggles with the delivery of its development projects, and the utilisation rate of its lines of credit programme is low (35). India-US triangular partnerships, particularly in regions like Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific, must contend with each country's priorities, geopolitical complexities, and operational hurdles. A significant challenge is in aligning goals and strategies. While the US often views triangular cooperation from a strategic lens, India's development-oriented priorities outweigh other motives, compelling a non-intrusive approach. What adds to the complexity is the third country's place in the triangular equation and its relationship with the US.

Another challenge is the asymmetry in resources and institutional capacities. US funding and institutional frameworks often dominate, leading to concerns about equitable decision-making, which could affect the credibility of these partnerships. Partner countries may perceive such collaborations as aligning too closely with US-led strategies, not positively impacting India's image as a neutral development partner.

India and its partners can consider establishing norms, standards, and institutional mechanisms for greater success, but whether this modality can be scaled up remains to be seen (36).

Another key factor at the international level is the geopolitical dimension of triangular cooperation, where major players often pursue overlapping objectives. For example, China's emergence as a major donor and development partner for over 150 countries, many in the Global South, has significantly impacted the space for development cooperation traditionally dominated by Western countries, led by the US. Unlike Western powers, China does not carry the baggage of colonialism, giving it easier access to the markets and resources of developing nations, who are often wary of the West. India, by contrast, occupies a relatively advantageous position as a significant emerging market willing to engage with both the Global North and South. India's approach lacks the hostility toward the West often associated with China, providing it a unique opportunity to engage with a diverse range of nations within the framework of triangular cooperation. These geopolitical dynamics are particularly evident in Africa and Latin America, where developing economies seek partnerships with global players like India, China, and the US while striving to avoid entanglement in broader geopolitical rivalries. The challenge for India lies in leveraging its strategic and economic strengths to enhance trilateral cooperation in emerging regions (Africa and Latin America) while maintaining close ties with the US as a strategic partner. How effectively India navigates this complex terrain will determine the success of its triangular cooperation efforts.

## Conclusion

Triangular cooperation has emerged as a crucial framework in an increasingly interconnected and multipolar world, acting as the developmental counterpart to the strategic alignments of other mechanisms. While many collaborative mechanisms prioritise security and strategic imperatives in a specific region (for instance, the Quad in the Indo-Pacific), triangular partnerships focus on fostering inclusive growth, addressing developmental challenges, and promoting sustainable economic collaboration.

For India, triangular cooperation offers an opportunity to project its development expertise globally while simultaneously strengthening its domestic capacities. These partnerships can ensure impactful, accountable, and locally-owned development outcomes by leveraging their comparative advantages—India's on-ground expertise and the US's financial and institutional resources.

Ultimately, triangular cooperation is more than a tool for external collaboration; it is a pathway for India to refine its developmental strategies, deepen regional ties, and strengthen its global standing as a key partner in addressing shared challenges. This mechanism aligns with India's vision of fostering a multipolar and balanced world order and underscores the transformative potential of partnership-driven approaches in an era of shifting geopolitics.

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# The India-UK Triangular Partnership for Sustainable Development in the Indo-Pacific

Swati Prabhu

**I**ndia's bilateral engagements under South-South cooperation have shaped its development cooperation initiatives (1). However, owing to the changing global developmental landscape and its evolving role as a development partner, India has actively taken part in crafting alternative platforms like the IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) Dialogue Forum and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) to strengthen its bilateral initiatives. This has resulted in a 'gradual openness' of its stance towards triangular cooperation (2). India's involvement with the United Nations (UN) through the India-UN Development Partnership Fund is a pertinent example (3). India's 'gradual openness' towards triangular cooperation can also be understood as a 'brokering mechanism' to dispense capacity-building, skills training and knowledge partnerships with the larger Global South (4). By utilising the Northern donors as brokers of triangular partnership, India aims



to connect with partners in other developing countries to offer support through capacity-building, administrative expertise, skills training, and so on. Since 2015, by signing agreements with the UK, the US, the European Union (EU), Japan, and France, India has exhibited visible signs of accepting triangular cooperation or cooperation in third countries as a preferred modality (5).

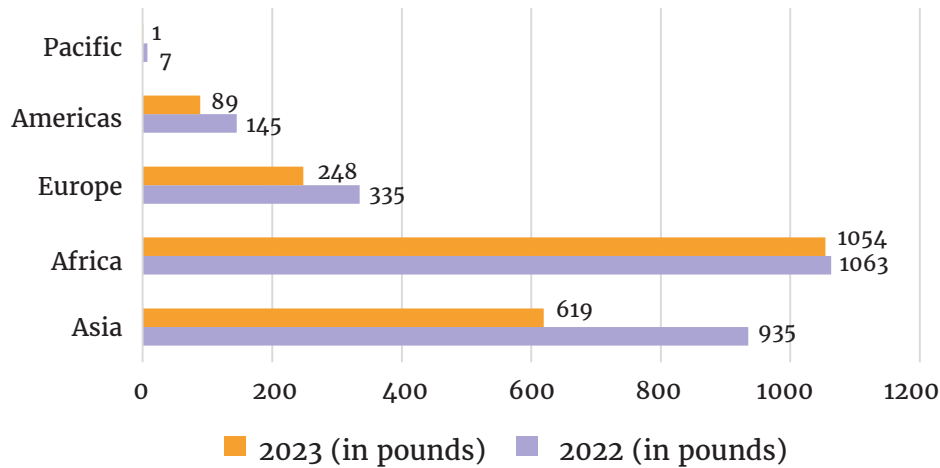
This essay attempts to understand India's engagement with the UK under the triangular partnership model, the projects undertaken, the challenges faced, and the prospective opportunities ahead in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

### **India and the UK: Differing Development Partnership Models**

Following its EU exit in 2020 and the subsequent creation of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the UK's development strategy has undergone strategic shifts. Indeed, the UK's present primary overseas development assistance (ODA) focus on eradicating poverty, tackling climate change, and biodiversity loss is evident following the release of the white paper on international development in 2023 (6).

In 2023, the UK's ODA totalled £15.4 billion (US\$19.3 billion), a 20.2 percent increase from 2022 (7). Most of these allocations covered the country's incoming refugee and migration costs. Critics underlined the lack of support to other crucial sectors like health, education, humanitarian assistance, water, and sanitation, potentially backtracking on its agenda of tackling poverty, marginalisation, and insecurity on a broader scale (8). Africa received the largest share of ODA from the UK in 2022 and 2023, at £1.05 billion (US\$1.3 billion) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Region-Wise Allocation of UK Bilateral ODA in 2022 and 2023**



Source: FCDO (9).

Although the UK's Indo-Pacific strategy, released in 2021, acknowledges the importance of enhancing London's engagement with the region to ensure long-term security and prosperity in the decade ahead (10), the ODA allocation does not align with its goal of prioritising the region (see Figure 1). Several least-developed countries (LDCs) in the Indian and Pacific Oceans are highly vulnerable to climate change and have limited means and access to resources, which impacts their ability to deal with complex sustainability challenges.

Conversely, as a Southern partner, India has a unique development partnership model that is organically inclined towards the SDGs. To be sure, India, too, faces its share of developmental challenges, but it still tries to manoeuvre emerging geopolitical interests, help mobilise resources and finances to meet the SDGs, and create a platform for inclusivity and shared prosperity-driven progress for all (11). Consider, for instance, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme. Through ITEC, India seeks to build capacities, share its best practices and knowledge, and train youth from other developing countries to meet their country's developmental targets. This practice has kept New Delhi at the forefront of the global sustainability narrative.

During its G20 presidency in 2023, India conceptualised the ‘Voice of the Global South Summit’, spotlighting the pressing sustainability challenges faced by the developing world that significantly influence the global economy (12). As such, India is weaving its unique development narrative for an inclusive future and is seeking to establish its identity as a credible and trusted partner for the international community.

## India-UK Triangular Cooperation Initiatives

### Supporting India’s Trade Preferences for Africa

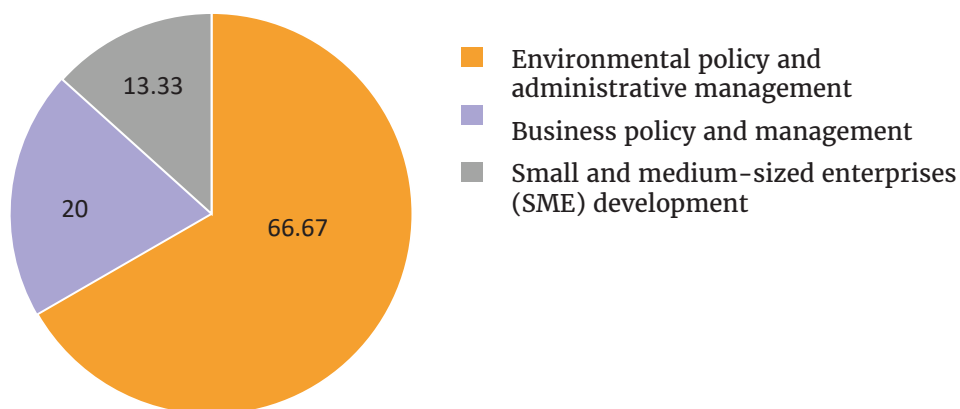
In 2015, India’s Ministry of External Affairs and the UK’s erstwhile Department for International Development (DFID) signed a joint statement of intent on cooperating in third countries to scale up bilateral ties to facilitate the sustainable development of developing countries in a demand-driven manner (13). The precursor to this statement is the 2014 Supporting India’s Trade Preferences for Africa (SITA) project, which laid the foundation of triangular cooperation between the two countries (14). SITA, the UK’s first aid-for-trade initiative, was a six-year project (2014–2020) focused on enhancing exports from five East African countries—Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda—to India to facilitate investments and augment job opportunities (15). With £19 million (US\$24.24 million) in funding from DFID, SITA was implemented by the UK’s International Trade Centre with the larger aim of trade diversification for India and Africa. Although the project had an impact in terms of exports, investment, skills training, and improving the business environment in the six African countries, it also encountered challenges (16), including the problems of inadequate skills and low competitiveness in the local job markets; the involvement of the private sector, civil society, and local agencies for curriculum design and iterative improvement; the need for a more targeted focus on the disadvantaged sections and women; and the need to incentivise foreign investors to put capital in African markets by making the products commercially viable, especially for the agricultural sector.

## Global Innovation Partnership

Jointly launched by India and the UK in 2021, the Global Innovation Partnership (GIP) aims to catalyse trilateral development cooperation for sustainability in Asia, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific. The GIP's procedural elements entail joint designing specific programmes in third countries to “foster, transfer and scale up...climate smart [Indian] innovations” (17). The GIP has a co-financing target of US\$100 million over 14 years. Through seed funding, grants, investments, and technical assistance, the GIP will support Indian start-ups, innovators, and entrepreneurs in implementing and scaling up development solutions in third countries (18). Support by the Indian private ecosystem, civil society, and bottom-up innovators is crucial for implementing the GIP.

Sectors such as agriculture and food security, health, potable water, clean energy, and fintech have been prioritised (see Figure 2) (19). Countries such as Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar have been listed under the programme (as of 2024).

**Figure 2: Sectoral Allocation of Funds Under GIP (as of 2022)**



Source: FCDO (20).

### UK-India Infrastructure Financing Bridge

In September 2024, the City of London Corporation and NITI Aayog signed the UK-India Infrastructure Financing Bridge (UKFIIB) to facilitate sustainable infrastructure investment in India. This financing bridge is expected to bolster infrastructure partnerships through national highways, renewable energy, and regional rapid transport networks (21). By combining the UK's finances and India's capacity to generate high-value returns in long-term scenarios, the UKFIIB also aims to accelerate the inflow of private investment by designing sustainable infrastructure. One of the key factors determining the implementation of the UKFIIB relates to building a steady and diverse pool of financing that can manage and mitigate risks. Other project-associated elements include job creation, economic growth, and strengthening trade between the two countries. The UKFIIB should also be used to fund infrastructure in other countries in Asia and Africa.

### DFID-TERI Partnership for Clean Energy Access and Improved Policies for Sustainable Development

Focussing on African households, especially in Kenya and Ethiopia, this partnership between DFID and The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) aimed to scale up viable business models for clean cooking and lighting solutions (22). The project ran between 2011 and 2015 with a total funding of £9 million (US\$11.2 million) provided by DFID and the Global Development Partnership Programme. At the end of the project, 33,124 improved cookstoves and 23,411 solar lighting solutions were distributed (23). Additionally, the project piloted 10 new technologies and delivery models for African clean energy solutions (24). This is a pertinent example of the UK's partnership with an Indian civil society organisation that can be replicated with many other such bodies.

### Strategic Health and Nutrition Partnership

The Strategic Health and Nutrition Partnership (SHNP), which ran between 2013 and 2018, aimed to reform health financing in India and establish dissemination networks in developing African countries. The

main elements of the project included improving nursing and midwifery training infrastructure and implementing pilots to strengthen the role of nurses; offering technical assistance to the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare; generating evidence and pilots, and building the capacity for Universal Health Coverage; developing and disseminating evidence on India's healthcare financing models for Africa (25).

### The Global Knowledge Partnership Programme

This project aimed to leverage India's development learnings and practices and the global evidence on policies impacting development outcomes. Running from 2012 to 2016, the Global Knowledge Partnership Programme (KKP) had three broad objectives: "gathering and uptake of evidence on issues central to India's national development that have potential for replication in Low Income Countries (LICs); gathering and uptake of evidence on issues central to India's national development having significant impacts on global poverty; and Promote sharing of Indian evidence, best practice and expertise with LICs in order to facilitate policy review" (26). Working primarily with civil society, academic institutions, and industry chambers, the KKP focused on resource scarcity, food security, climate change, health and disease control, women and girls, and trade, investment, and development effectiveness. The programme established a KKP-India-Ethiopia partnership on economic empowerment, a KKP-India-Nepal partnership on piloting employment guarantee programmes, and furthered research on pharmaceutical quality systems for export from India to Africa.

### Innovation Ventures and Technology for Development

The Innovation Ventures and Technology for Development (INVENT) project encourages innovation in the private sector by providing investment capital and other business development services to enterprises in eight low-income Indian states and several developing countries in Asia and Africa (such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia). As of July 2023, INVENT established 78 pilot projects, with about 22.4 million

beneficiaries (including suppliers and customers) reached through £5 million (US\$6.2 million) in funding for the incubation programme and £18 million (US\$22.5 million) for the investment programme (27). The major sectors covered by the programme are agriculture, healthcare, livelihood and skill development, education, and energy.

### India-UK Global Partnership Programme on Development

Primarily categorised under the KKP, the India-UK Global Partnership Programme on Development (GPPD) focuses on low carbon, renewable (solar) energy-led green growth, climate-resilient infrastructure, digital- or tech-led innovative solutions for development and gender equality, and emerging Indian good practices. The programme was instrumental in supporting the development of the International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) (28). Between 2018 and 2023, with total funding of £6 million (US\$7.5 million), the GPPD supported the development of two innovative UK-India programmes, the GIP and the Technical Assistance Facility for Infrastructure for Resilient Island States, under CDRI. It also established technical cooperation with the EXIM Bank through the 'Netra Project', under which the FCDO funded the bank to develop an IT tool modelled on the UK's Aid Management Platform to support management systems for delivering and tracking India's US\$30 billion official lines of credit portfolio.

### India-UK Vaccine Partnership

During the COVID-19 pandemic, India's Serum Institute produced doses of the coronavirus vaccine developed by the UK's Oxford University and AstraZeneca. Recently, to counter malaria in African countries, two essential life-saving malaria vaccines (RTS,S and R21) have been distributed across Africa to immunise over six million children by the end of 2025 (29). The vaccines developed by UK scientists at GSK and the University of Oxford are now manufactured by Indian pharma firms Bharat Biotech and Serum Institute. In April 2024, the FCDO announced funding of £7 million (US\$8.7 million) to make malaria drugs and tests accessible to countries worldwide (30).

## Challenges and Prospects Ahead

### Bolstering Connectivity for Partnerships

India and the UK should look to bolster partnerships through connectivity frameworks targeted at the LDCs and small island developing states (SIDS) in the Indo-Pacific. Physical and digital connectivity, especially green infrastructure, is a significant challenge for many SIDS in the region. Plus, investments in this sector are paltry. India and the UK should work to attract finance from the private sector, philanthropies, and other relevant stakeholders in the region. They can also persuade the public development banks and multilateral development financing institutions to align their economic ideas with the SIDS' ecological targets.

### Private Sector Participation

Involving the private sector is crucial to achieving sustainability targets, especially climate mitigation and adaptation. The India-UK partnership has worked with private players through the KKP, GPPD, and the GIP to create robust frameworks of cooperation and dissemination in the developing countries of Africa. It should replicate this in the Pacific Island nations facing similar challenges in climate adaptation, natural disaster management, low employment, and depleting growth. Home to some dynamic economies, including India, the Indo-Pacific is crucial for addressing significant transnational issues (such as climate change, environmental security, clean energy, and cybersecurity) that can determine the future of sustainable development.

### Aligning 'Aid for Trade' Initiatives with Sustainable Development

Although discussions on a free trade agreement between India and the UK have repeatedly failed, India must reinforce the narrative of opening trade barriers, particularly amid increasing economic fragmentation, with low-income countries finding it difficult to access the markets freely (31). India and the UK should utilise what they have learned from Project



SITA to foster the capacities of developing countries to leverage their trading mechanisms. Further, India should push for reforms in the existing development cooperation mechanisms. One way is to align the idea of ‘aid for trade’ more closely with sustainability (32). New Delhi can work with the LDCs, SIDS, and low-income countries to develop their green trade capacities, such as leveraging investment in green technologies and sustainable practices; fostering skills in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and green manufacturing; and strengthening environment, social, and governance norms in trade matters. This will automatically bring them on par with the global economic landscape.

## Conclusion

Although traditional development partnerships, whether bilateral or multilateral, have been attempting to find innovative solutions for sustainable development, they are insufficient. Triangular development cooperation can facilitate the effective transfer of resources, finances, norms, and standards. With projects like SITA, KKP, INVENT, SHNP, GPPD, and GIP, the India-UK partnership can help plug the developmental loopholes faced by several Indo-Pacific island countries. With massive maritime capacities, procedural wherewithal, and economic heft, the UK should collaborate with India in tackling the pressing issues of climate adaptation, promoting free and fair-trade systems, bolstering green connectivity initiatives, and building the long-term resilience of the region. India’s experience in dealing with developmental challenges is significant. An upswing of partnership initiatives, particularly during the pandemic followed by its successful G20 presidency, has put New Delhi in the driver’s seat. The UK needs to capitalise upon and utilise this opportunity to deepen its engagement and reach with its Indo-Pacific partners to weave a strong sustainability story.

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# A Shared Vision for Growth: The India-Japan Approach to Triangular Cooperation

Pratnashree Basu and Raka Barman

**T**riangular cooperation allows countries like India and Japan to expand diplomatic influence, support global development goals, and strengthen bilateral ties. It merges South-South and North-South collaboration, enabling partnerships among developed and developing countries, international organisations, and other relevant stakeholders to realise the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The goal is to pool resources, expertise, and knowledge to support the developmental objectives of a third partner country. Triangular cooperation is an increasingly popular modality of development cooperation as it allows for more inclusive and adaptable approaches, drawing on the strengths of all participants.

Emerging and non-traditional donors are increasingly playing a significant role in international development, offering distinctive skills and innovative

approaches (1). Emerging donors are countries with relatively newer aid programmes. The evolving role of rising powers and other middle-income countries as development partners has led to greater diversity in approaches to development cooperation. When the Millennium Development Goals were first agreed upon, the world appeared to have an even division—there were ‘aid recipients’ (countries that had to achieve goals themselves) and ‘aid donors’ (countries that helped the recipients achieve these goals). In the SDGs era, these divisions are no longer as distinct. The rise of China, India, Brazil, and many other emerging economies has been accompanied by an expansion in the development cooperation assistance offered by these countries alongside the support provided by traditional donor countries (2). In such a context, triangular cooperation presents opportunities to shape new forms of partnerships that create synergies between North–South and South–South cooperation.

### **India and Japan, Natural Partners for Triangular Cooperation**

India was long hesitant about triangular cooperation due to its early experiences with development assistance, shaped by a commitment to non-alignment, solidarity with other Global South countries, and anti-colonialism. As such, India's approach to development cooperation has focused on South–South cooperation, intentionally distancing itself from Northern donors. This stance reflects India's critique of the Northern-dominated development architecture, which, it argues, perpetuates inequality and imposes conditionalities that fail to meet the real needs of developing countries (3). India has contested these Northern norms by positioning itself as a demand-oriented and egalitarian development partner.

Table 1 demonstrates the contributions of India and Japan to development cooperation partnerships along with shared areas of focus between the two countries. It juxtaposes Japan's leadership in advanced infrastructure, technological innovation, and financial mobilisation with India's expertise in grassroots capacity building, digital transformation, and affordable

solutions. Both countries are united by a shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific, actively engaging through multilateral platforms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad, alongside the US and Australia), the G20, and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) to further their common development objectives and address pressing global challenges.

**Table 1: Development Cooperation Partnership Synergies between India and Japan**

Aspect	Japan's Contribution	India's Contribution	Joint Focus
<b>Complementary Expertise</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leader in infrastructure development, technology transfer, and financial resources.</li> <li>• Focus on quality infrastructure through Official Development Assistance, particularly in Asia and Africa.</li> <li>• Aligns with global needs for sustainable and reliable projects.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expertise in grassroots-level capacity building, digital transformation, healthcare, and affordable solutions.</li> <li>• Developmental experiences resonate in regions like Africa and Southeast Asia, where conditions mirror India's own historical challenges.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperation in combining infrastructure development and grassroots-level solutions for sustainable outcomes.</li> </ul>
<b>Shared Vision for the Indo-Pacific</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concerned with regional stability and maritime security.</li> <li>• Strong focus on sustainable development in Indo-Pacific countries.</li> <li>• Seen as a counterbalance to China's BRI.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shares Japan's vision for a free, open, and stable Indo-Pacific region.</li> <li>• Emphasises maritime security and regional stability.</li> <li>• Supports alternative infrastructure development to counterbalance the BRI.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both countries act as stabilising forces in the Indo-Pacific and promote sustainable development.</li> </ul>

Aspect	Japan's Contribution	India's Contribution	Joint Focus
<b>Multilateral Engagements and Institutions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active member of multilateral groupings such as the Quad, G20, and AAGC.</li> <li>• Utilises these platforms to support shared developmental goals and partnerships.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engages in the Quad, G20, and AAGC, focusing on South-South cooperation and development.</li> <li>• Uses these platforms to extend its development reach to Africa and Southeast Asia.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborate through multilateral forums to foster partnerships and advance developmental goals.</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' own.

However, India's evolving role in triangular cooperation, particularly in partnership with Japan, has the potential to reshape global development cooperation. Both countries commit to deeper collaboration with host governments through initiatives like India's 'Act East Policy' and the '10 guiding principles for engagement with African countries' (4), combined with Japan's 'Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure Initiative' and the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) Declaration (5). This synergy between India's ground-level approach and Japan's infrastructure expertise focuses on connectivity and infrastructure development in the Indo-Pacific and Africa (see Table 2). Together, their unique collaboration could significantly contribute to achieving the SDGs and reshape the global architecture of development partnerships (6).

Bilateral relations between New Delhi and Tokyo have steadily expanded and remain positive. Over the past decade, ties have developed under the 'Free, Open, and Inclusive Indo-Pacific' vision as both countries are geopolitically invested in preserving regional peace, prosperity, and stability, "freedom of navigation," and "rule of law" (7). This shared vision has significantly expanded cooperation on critical issues such as maritime security, counterterrorism, and regional stability.



**Table 2: Specific Policy Synergies in Development Cooperation between India and Japan**

India's Initiatives	Japan's Initiatives	Synergies
Act East Policy	Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure Initiative	Both policies emphasise the importance of infrastructure development as a catalyst for economic growth in the region. Collaborative projects can enhance connectivity and trade.
10 Guiding Principles for Engagement with Africa	TICAD VI Nairobi Declaration	Shared objectives in promoting sustainable development and enhancing investment opportunities in Africa. Collaborative frameworks can strengthen political and economic ties.
Focus on enhancing trade relations with East Asian countries and Africa	Focus on developing high-quality infrastructure in partner countries	Joint infrastructure projects can boost trade routes, facilitating smoother and more efficient trade flows between India, Japan, and African nations.
Emphasis on people-to-people ties and cultural exchange	Promotion of capacity building and human resource development	Initiatives can be aligned to promote educational exchanges, skill development, and cultural understanding, fostering stronger relationships among the nations involved.

Source: Authors' own.

Alongside their robust bilateral engagements, the India-Japan partnership can also play a vital role in regional and multilateral initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, Quad, and AAGC. In a spatial framework, improved connectivity between the two countries could contribute to the development process of India's Northeast region and enhance connectivity with Southeast Asia. The Act East Forum, established in 2017, has served as a driving force to advance India-Japan cooperation in the Northeast. The late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe also believed India and Japan are natural partners in maritime security as Asia's two major seafaring countries located at strategic points of the Indo-Pacific region (8).

In 2020, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar suggested India and Japan were looking to work together in third countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, and could also partner in Russia's Far Eastern region and the Pacific Island countries (9). Jaishankar underscored that India views Japan "as a natural partner in India's journey, development and transformation, and in its quest for peace, prosperity and stability in the Indo-Pacific" (10). He attributed this natural partnership to shared aspirations for advancing the development of the Global South, reforming global governance institutions and mechanisms, combating transnational crimes, and safeguarding supply chains from disruptions. Regarding development cooperation, he highlighted the shared goal of achieving a total investment of 5 trillion yen (US\$42 billion) between the two sides (11).

### India-Japan Triangular Cooperation

India and Japan are committed to advancing peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific by fostering economic growth, enhancing connectivity through quality infrastructure, and building partner capacity. They emphasise that development cooperation must be transparent, inclusive, and aligned with international standards, respecting sovereignty, ensuring responsible debt practices, and supporting local priorities. Their regional collaboration, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, gained momentum in 2018 with the announcement of an LNG terminal project in Sri Lanka (12). The two countries have since been involved in several infrastructure connectivity initiatives.

Connecting India's Northeast states with Southeast Asia is a core component of the Act East policy. This policy aims to enhance economic, cultural, and even geostrategic ties between these states and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region through a comprehensive network of interconnected roads, ports, airports, and power and telecommunications projects. However, the divergent political and economic priorities of the nations involved have resulted in inconsistent progress.

New Delhi and Tokyo's collaboration also extends significantly into the energy sector. Japan's Asia Energy Transition Initiative, launched in 2021, initially aimed to support ASEAN countries in achieving net-zero emissions, offering US\$10 billion in financial assistance for renewable energy projects. In March 2022, India's Ministry of External Affairs outlined the details of the Clean Energy Partnership between the two nations (13). India has set an ambitious target to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2070, while Japan has committed to reaching this goal by 2050. Both nations strategically engage in low-carbon "sunrise" sectors, leveraging emerging technologies and innovative business models to reduce carbon emissions. Japan released an interim report on its clean energy strategy in 2022, emphasising the necessity of large-scale investments in clean energy sectors, including hydrogen and ammonia technologies, fostering domestic demand through offshore wind power, attracting investments, and establishing a domestic manufacturing capacity of 150 GWh batteries by 2030 (14).

### Sri Lanka

In 2019, India and Japan signed a memorandum of cooperation with Sri Lanka to develop the East Container Terminal (ECT) at Colombo Harbour (with Colombo retaining full ownership) (15). However, India-Japan collaboration in Sri Lanka has been hampered by political instability in that country. Successive Lankan administrations have swung from downplaying ties with India in favour of China to rapprochement with India. The cancellation of the India-Japan deal for the ECT in 2021 (16) and the suspension of the Japanese-funded light rail transit project by the Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration resulted in strained ties between Tokyo and Colombo. However, India and Japan came to Sri Lanka's aid during its economic crisis in 2022, offering support for the country's debt restructuring process. In response, the Ranil Wickremesinghe government has sought to revive infrastructure projects and secure further investment from both nations (17). As a key partner in infrastructure development and investment, China is also an attractive option for immediate financial support to Sri Lanka. However, the mounting debt associated with

Chinese investments has led to concerns about economic sovereignty and dependency. On the other hand, India has historically maintained strong cultural, political, and economic ties with Sri Lanka. New Delhi is interested in supporting Colombo's stability and development, particularly considering regional security dynamics. The Lankan government appears to be seeking to leverage China and India for economic assistance while considering the long-term implications of dependency on either nation, which could impact India-Japan triangular cooperation projects in the country.

### Myanmar

India is actively pursuing several connectivity projects in Myanmar, including the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP, an industrial corridor linking India's Northeast to Myanmar), the Mandalay bus service, and the Mekong-India Economic Corridor. As of April 2024, about 70 percent of the trilateral highway is complete, with the remaining in various stages of construction. The ongoing political and security situation in Myanmar has delayed the completion of the highway, with it now expected to be completed by 2027. The KMMTTP was scheduled to be completed by its revised deadline of December 2023 but is still under construction, although the Sittwe port has been operationalised. Meanwhile, between 2011 and 2020, Japan's investments in Myanmar were estimated to be over US\$1.7 billion, including four loan agreements totalling US\$1 billion. Additionally, 39 Japanese companies are active in the Thilawa Special Economic Zone, operating in the transportation, real estate, hospitality, and tourism sectors (18). Tokyo established an early presence in the ASEAN region with significant investments, guided by the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine (19, 20). However, these early efforts have since taken a backseat, with China now commanding a stronger regional influence. Despite this shift, Myanmar has traditionally relied on Japan as a key source of foreign aid.

India and Japan have forged a trilateral partnership with Myanmar on infrastructure initiatives to enhance 15 educational institutions in the

Rakhine State. Myanmar is also keen to improve its information and communications technology, telecommunications, and e-governance sectors, and has earmarked a substantial US\$100 million to implement its E-Governance Master Plan. Notably, Japanese corporations, including KDDI and Sumitomo Corp, have already made significant inroads into the Myanmar market, collectively investing US\$2 billion in telecommunications. Meanwhile, India has established the Centre of Excellence in Software Development and Training in Myanmar, funded through the ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund, further solidifying collaborative technological efforts (21).

Ongoing instability in Myanmar presents difficulties for India-Japan cooperation in that country. A critical obstacle is how the two countries deal with the military regime in Naypyidaw. India's strategic autonomy imperatives encourage maintaining relations with the junta regime, while Japan has followed the US's lead in imposing sanctions and halting all developmental aid until the junta is ousted. Myanmar is perhaps the most prominent instance of donor countries diverging on their political position vis-à-vis the third country. Nonetheless, if the situation in Myanmar is resolved, India and Japan will follow through on their projects.

### **Bangladesh**

Bangladesh has been the fulcrum of India-Japan cooperation in third countries. The lion's share of projects currently being funded in Bangladesh relate to connectivity, with the Japan International Cooperation Agency-funded Matarbari port forming the locus of a network of roads and railways extending between India's Northeast states and Bangladesh. This network is expected to encourage Indian, Bangladeshi, and Japanese companies to relocate to industrial townships around the new highways and railheads (22). In June 2018, Japanese trading company Marubeni Corp. and India's Larsen & Toubro (L&T) secured a contract for MRT Line 6 of the Dhaka Metro Rail, Bangladesh's inaugural mass rapid transit (MRT) system. Funded through Japanese assistance, the 20 km line covering 16 stations is expected to reduce congestion and air pollution in Dhaka significantly.

Marubeni and L&T had previously partnered to develop two power plants in Bangladesh, but these did not progress; the MRT project was the first collaboration between the two countries to construct a railway system in a third country. However, developments since the August 2024 protests and the change of administration could potentially jeopardise triangular cooperation efforts.

### Africa

Japan has engaged with Africa since 1993 through TICAD to foster regional development (23). India began collaborating with Japan on African development in 2010, but this was paused after three years due to India and Japan's fundamentally different approaches to Africa (24). However, such collaboration regained momentum in 2015 following the third India–Africa Forum Summit, which led to the establishment of the AAGC. Announced jointly by India and Japan in November 2016, the AAGC aims to enhance development assistance in Africa through a people-centric, sustainable growth strategy. This vision will be shaped through extensive consultations across Asia and Africa involving diverse stakeholders. The AAGC also serves as a counterbalance to China's growing economic influence in Africa and Asia. It was founded on four key pillars: development and cooperation projects, quality infrastructure and institutional connectivity, capacity and skill enhancement, and fostering people-to-people partnerships. It aims to support African development by prioritising responsible funding, mindful debt servicing, climate considerations, and transparency. It encourages private-sector participation over state-driven initiatives, requiring innovative collaboration to align African businesses and governments with Indian and Japanese companies. This approach appeals to many African nations, which prefer structured projects with clear business plans.

The AAGC focuses on key development areas, including health and pharmaceuticals, agriculture and agro-processing, disaster management, skill enhancement, and quality infrastructure. These initiatives aim to promote connectivity and sustainable development that are aligned with the SDGs. The Japan External Trade Organization and Confederation

of Indian Industry have facilitated meetings between private sector representatives from India, Japan, and African countries (25). Additionally, the AAGC Vision Study employs the Geographical Simulation Model to evaluate the economic benefits of integrating Africa with India, South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Oceania (26).

India's financial limitations hinder its ability to offer substantial aid or incentives to African nations as China does. While India can engage African countries in development projects, it lacks the vast financial resources to extend the same level of concessional aid that might make them dependent partners, like China's approach. This could hamper the development of the AAGC. However, this slow progress of the AAGC is unlikely to affect India's bilateral relations with African nations significantly. India continues to strengthen its ties with Africa; it has provided concessional loans exceeding US\$12.3 billion to the continent and has completed 197 projects, with 65 more currently underway (27). However, the AAGC has failed to take off as intended, primarily due to limitations on India's part (with little to none from Japan).

## Conclusion

Given the contemporary global landscape, characterised by multifaceted crises and economic challenges, the evolution of triangular cooperation, particularly between India and Japan, is a critical avenue for fostering sustainable development partnerships. However, this partnership format remains underutilised by the two countries due to their respective foreign policy imperatives and the challenges in third countries.

Nonetheless, the potential and prospect for triangular cooperation between Tokyo and New Delhi in various regions offer insights into the complexities of developmental partnerships, particularly the political, economic, and strategic contexts. For instance, political stability in the third country is critical for the success of long-term projects. Political volatility and changing governance structures significantly hinder the execution of joint initiatives. Further, aligning strategic and economic interests to

foster effective collaboration in a third country is crucial. Where both countries' goals and priorities align, the partnership tends to flourish, demonstrating that cooperation is most successful when driven by mutual objectives. Conversely, misalignments—particularly in political ideologies or foreign policy approaches—can strain relations and lead to delays or cancellations of major projects. The experiences also highlight the importance of sustainability in development models. As global concerns around debt sustainability and environmental impact grow, India and Japan's collaborative efforts must increasingly emphasise accountability and long-term viability.

Trilateral cooperation between India and Japan has allowed both nations to leverage their unique strengths to address the developmental needs of emerging economies. Significantly, it has enhanced their respective international standing and facilitated mutual interests. Indeed, through active participation in multilateral initiatives, the two countries can aim to collectively address pressing global challenges, thereby positioning themselves as responsible partners in the international community.

The India-Japan development partnership has been well received in the third countries due to its potential to address critical development challenges, stimulate sustainable economic growth, and counterbalance China's influence. Given the partnership's emphasis on transparency and alignment with international development best practices, these nations view the India-Japan partnership as an opportunity to diversify their economic and strategic alliances. However, political instability in partner countries is a significant hurdle requiring a pragmatic and adaptive approach to cooperation. Nevertheless, the two countries' commitment to fostering peace, stability, and prosperity through collective efforts remains paramount.

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# India and the European Union: Prospects for Triangular Partnership in Africa

Ankita Dutta

**T**riangular cooperation is gaining increasing attention as geopolitics and the global development landscape change. The emergence of rising powers as development partners rather than recipients has resulted in several new development cooperation approaches, including triangular cooperation, which presents unique opportunities to shape South-South and North-South cooperation (1). The Addis Ababa Action Agenda defines “triangular cooperation as a means of bringing relevant experience and expertise to bear in development cooperation” (2). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) delineates triangular partnership as a development modality that includes projects and initiatives combining the technical expertise and advantages of traditional donors and partners to address developmental concerns in developing countries (3).

India and the European Union (EU) are often referred to as partners of choice, well suited as pivotal and facilitating partners in triangular cooperation (4). Given India's own developmental trajectory, India is expected to play a more decisive leadership role in sharing its development experience and promoting South-South cooperation. Indeed, several initiatives undertaken by India—such as the IBSA Fund for poverty and hunger alleviation, Coalition for Disaster Resilience Infrastructure (with the UK), Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (with Japan), and International Solar Alliance (with France)—showcase its global action on development issues and highlight that such initiatives can no longer be determined by the North-South divide (5). India is now also working towards increasing its bilateral cooperation with traditional donor countries like Norway, the UK, and the US to implement projects in Africa and Asia.

Under the European Consensus on Sustainable Development (6), the EU has identified triangular cooperation as an effective modality to promote the exchange of best practices, technical assistance, and knowledge. Basing its approach on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs), the EU is working towards identifying, mobilising, and harnessing various responses to access knowledge, expertise, and resources to build momentum to “work together, share, learn, innovate and tackle the challenges” (7). As the EU focuses on development challenges and knowledge and expertise, the role of its partners is the key factor in determining when an intervention falls within the scope of triangular cooperation. In 2015, the EU launched the ADELANTE programme, focusing on triangular cooperation in the Latin American and Caribbean region. Under this instrument, the EU has launched multiple initiatives (8), such as astro-tourism for sustainable local development (Mexico, Peru, and Chile) and smart cities (Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Colombia, Argentina, and Uruguay). This essay analyses the prospects of India-EU triangular partnership in Africa.

## India-EU and Triangular Cooperation

India and the EU share a longstanding partnership that can be traced back to the 1994 Cooperation Agreement (9). It was upgraded to a strategic partnership in 2004, followed by the adoption of the EU-India Joint Action Plan in 2005, which defined shared objectives and proposed a wide range of activities in political, economic, and development cooperation. Since 2008, the action plan has focused on four priorities: peace and comprehensive security, sustainable development, research and technology, and people-to-people and cultural exchanges.

Although the EU-India partnership mainly focused on trade and cultural issues instead of political and strategic concerns, India's increasing global profile and domestic development trajectory have renewed European interest in boosting cooperation. On the economic front, the EU is India's largest trading partner, accounting for €124 billion (approx US\$130.2 billion) in goods trade in 2023 (12.2 percent of total Indian trade), while India is the EU's ninth largest trading partner (10). The EU's share in foreign investment stock in India reached €108.3 billion (approx US\$113.8 billion) in 2022, making it a leading foreign investor (11). In recent years, many strategic dialogues have been institutionalised, including on counterterrorism, climate change, maritime security, artificial intelligence, and connectivity. Despite these positive trends, the EU's relations with India fall short on delivery; in 2024, the European Parliament noted that the "partnership has gained momentum in recent years, reflecting ... a renewed political will to strengthen their partnership across a number of sectors and policy areas; whereas this partnership has, however, not yet reached its full potential" (12). This is primarily because several critical issues remain even as the partnership has progressed. For instance, although negotiations on the India-EU free trade agreement restarted in June 2021 after a nine-year hiatus, long-standing concerns about market access, the movement of high-skilled professionals, digital data, and intellectual property rights are unresolved. Similarly, the EU's carbon border adjustment mechanism policy will impose increased tariffs on certain Indian products, such as steel and aluminium, making them

uncompetitive. Geopolitically, China also presents a significant challenge. While India and the EU are working to reduce their reliance on China, there is discord between the Union and its member states on their China policies.

Still, the EU and India are keen to expand ties, and a triangular partnership offers India and the EU an avenue to pool their resources and expertise. Indeed, the joint statement released after the 2016 India-EU Summit refers to exploring “possibilities for development partnership and triangular cooperation” (13). A similar iteration is also present in the EU’s India Strategy released in 2018, where triangular cooperation is a proposed course of action to address global challenges (14). The EU-India Strategic Partnership Roadmap, released in 2020, called for establishing “an EU-India Annual Review on Development partnership in third countries” and to “launch concrete trilateral/cooperation projects in pilot partner countries” (15). Their Connectivity Strategy, released in 2021, identifies cooperation on “connectivity with third countries and regions, including Africa, Central Asia and the Indo-Pacific,” and calls for recognising India as an important sustainable development partner and to develop and facilitate India-EU collaboration in pilot third countries (16).

India has signed bilateral triangular development cooperation partnerships with two EU countries: France and Germany. In 2023, India and France decided to work on setting up the Indo-Pacific Triangular Cooperation Fund to support climate- and SDG-focused startups and innovations in third countries in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Prospects for Triangular Cooperation: The Africa Example**

While India has been cooperating bilaterally with individual EU member states in the triangular format, a clear blueprint exists to pursue such cooperation with the grouping. Africa is a priority for both New Delhi and Brussels. Increasing economic engagement between the EU and Africa and

India and Africa lays the ground for India and the EU to collaborate in specific sectors in the region.

EU–Africa cooperation is guided by the Joint EU–Africa Strategy, adopted at their 2007 Summit in Lisbon. A vision document was adopted in February 2022, with four deliverables: “renewed and enhanced cooperation for peace and security”, “migration and mobility”, “commitment to multilateralism... within the rules-based international order, with the UN at its core”, and “Africa–Europe Investment Package of at least €150 billion [approx US\$157.6 billion]” worth of grants and investment supported by the EU budget (17).

India’s outreach to Africa rests on “three fundamental principles: no conditionalities, no prescriptions, and no questioning of sovereignty” (18). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi detailed the guiding principles for India–Africa relations during his 2018 address at the Ugandan parliament: development partnership, capacity building, trade and investment, harnessing India’s experience with digital revolution to support Africa’s development, working to improve Africa’s agriculture, combating terrorism and extremism, multilateralism and the reform of global institutions (19). The India–Africa Defence Ministers’ Conclave was held in 2020, which led to the adoption of the Lucknow Declaration to increase defence, military, and security cooperation between India and African countries (20).

Through triangular cooperation, India and the EU can leverage their strengths in Africa to enhance their presence, explore opportunities for collaboration, and increase their competitive edge and funds. The inaugural joint consultation between India and the EU on Africa was held in 2022, focusing on areas of mutual interest and exploring opportunities for further collaboration and consultation (21).

India’s development cooperation model with African countries combines technology transfer, development assistance, and infrastructure assistance based on African needs. India–Africa trade reached US\$103 billion in 2023 (22), making India Africa’s third-largest trading partner after the EU

and China. India is also the second-largest investor in Africa, with total investments amounting to US\$70 billion (23). India has extended 211 lines of credit totalling US\$12.85 billion to African countries for various infrastructure projects, including hydroelectricity, power plants, dams, roads, skill development, and telecommunications (24). Development cooperation is also a significant pillar of the EU–Africa partnership. During her visit to the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa in 2019, European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen reiterated the EU’s commitment to building a “partnership of equals” (25). In 2021, the EU created a ‘Neighborhood, International and Development Cooperation Instrument’ with a budget of €79.5 billion (approx US\$83.7 billion) for 2021–2027 to promote agriculture, education and industrialisation, strengthen research, support local communities engaged in international cooperation activities, and aid military spending (26). The EU has also used several other instruments to provide aid and funds to Africa, such as the European Peace Facility, to support the African Union, and to cooperate in peace and security (27).

India and the EU each have a robust development package for the African continent. Through triangular cooperation, India and the EU can bring innovative solutions to the rapidly changing development challenges by building synergies and complementarities between their development cooperation models. This is primarily because development and enhanced cooperation are essential drivers of their respective policies towards Africa. Combining the best features of the European development policy, which includes technical and financial aid, with India’s model of capacity building, increasing technical expertise and assistance can help arrive at practical solutions for Africa’s development challenges. India and the EU recognise that while modernisation and development will help reduce poverty and inequalities in Africa, stabilising the continent (28), this development partnership should be guided by African priorities (29).

Connectivity and infrastructure have emerged as key areas of discussion within triangular partnerships. A substantial annual investment gap exists between what is required and what is currently being spent on infrastructure



worldwide (30). China dominates investments in infrastructure through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Despite criticisms of debt traps and rights abuses (31), other countries have found it increasingly difficult to counter the BRI. However, triangular partnerships allow countries to expand their presence in the global infrastructure sector and counter Chinese influence.

India's approach to connectivity is based on multimodal development and infrastructure projects, including rail and road links, energy cooperation, cross-border transits, and financial assistance. Under the €300 billion (approx US\$315.3 billion) Global Gateway Initiative, the EU plans to invest €150 billion (approx US\$157.6 billion) in African infrastructure between 2021 and 2027.

Through its Pan-African e-Network (launched in 2009), India provides tele-education and telemedicine to African nations through satellite, fibre optics, and wireless networks, connecting African nations with top educational institutions and super-speciality hospitals in India. The subsequent phase of the network introduced the e-VidyaBharti and e-ArogyaBharti (e-VBAB) in 2019 to provide free tele-education to African students and continuing medical education for healthcare professionals. India is also part of various development projects in several African countries (32).

The EU's involvement in infrastructure and connectivity in Africa includes 7,100 km of fibre optic networks, including submarine cables across the Mediterranean and East Africa, and the installation of 40 gigawatts of clean hydrogen production by 2030 (33). Digital connectivity is an important pillar of the India-EU strategic partnership, and the two sides could further practical cooperation in this area in the developing economies in Africa. This can be leveraged through various policy initiatives that emphasise the digital integration of Africa, such as Digital4Development, Africa and Europe: A Joint Vision for 2030, the Indian Technical and Economic Co-operation Programme, and the Pan-African e-network. Indeed, India-EU cooperation in Africa on this front can also further the provision of digital financial services across the continent and potentially strengthen African economies.

The EU-India Connectivity Partnership adopted in 2020 underlines the importance of sustainable connectivity that considers social, economic, fiscal, climate, and environmental sustainability issues. Given their presence in Africa, India and the EU can also explore new opportunities to present their partnership as a credible alternative to China-led infrastructure and connectivity projects. To further their strategic partnership and promote sustainable development in African nations, in September 2024, the EU and India agreed to enhance cooperation in river basin management, foster innovation and technology transfer, promote sustainable investments, and explore trilateral collaboration with East Africa (34).

## Conclusion

Amid widespread geopolitical change, triangular development partnerships have emerged as a new development model. India's existing triangular partnerships, including with European countries like France and Germany, make a strong case for triangular development partnerships with the EU and beyond.

India-EU-Africa triangular cooperation presents an opportunity for India and the EU partners to enhance their strategic cooperation. African countries have long been key partners for India, and the European Commission has also now prioritised relations with Africa. As such, the EU-India triangular development cooperation in Africa can be developed at two levels. First, leveraging the EU and India's development cooperation experience. Both partners can work to create an institutional framework for triangular cooperation with African countries and regional organisations in Africa in sectors with the potential for development (such as infrastructure, technology, and science)

Second, promoting and supporting the achievement of the SDGs. Triangular partnerships address critical contemporary challenges (climate change, environmental degradation, poverty, and lack of climate-resilient infrastructure). India and the EU can initiate a dedicated dialogue on

achieving the SDGs in Africa to identify priority areas for trilateral cooperation.

There is enormous potential to further Indian and European engagement in Africa, but it remains to be seen how they capitalise on the available opportunities in the region. Given their respective experiences across Africa, India and the EU have the diplomatic, political, and economic mileage to emerge as crucial and credible partners for all African nations. Although China has made substantial inroads through its engagement with Africa, India-EU cooperation with Africa offers a true partnership for the continent and its countries.

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# Building Sustainable Partnerships in Third Countries: The Indian and French Development Agenda in the Indo-Pacific

Alisée Pornet

**F**rance is India's oldest comprehensive strategic partner; diplomatic relations were established in 1947 and upgraded to the strategic level in 1998. In 2023, to mark the 25th anniversary of strategic ties, the two countries signed a new roadmap revolving around international peace and stability and, reaffirming their commitment to a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and beyond (1). The roadmap places climate change and sustainability at the heart of the cooperation, especially in third countries.

In recent years, many international partners, including traditional donor countries, have increased their engagement with India in international development cooperation, primarily through trilateral cooperation and a South-North cooperation strategy. For India and France, trilateral cooperation is perceived as a valuable development cooperation modality

that connects the continents and contributes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by using the complementary strengths of different partners to arrive at co-created development solutions.

India and France are resident Indo-Pacific nations, sharing a common vision for this crucial region. France signed its first Indo-Pacific Strategic Roadmap with India in July 2023 (2), with triangular cooperation as a key element of the roadmap implementation. This essay reviews the existing engagement between France and India, studying the various modalities that shape this important cooperation. It also focuses on three key examples of this triangular development cooperation on sustainable issues—the Indo-Pacific Triangular Cooperation Fund, Indo-Pacific Park Partnerships, and Sustainable Finance in the Indo-Pacific (SUFIP).

## The Development Agenda in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific is at the forefront of the global response to climate change. This region, characterised by diverse geopolitical dynamics, is crucial for addressing and mitigating climate impacts. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific, encompassing 40 countries highly vulnerable to climate change, will be the epicentre of future climate shocks and is pivotal for climate-related challenges and solutions. Key statistics highlight the urgency for a strengthened resilience agenda in the Indo-Pacific:

- It is responsible for about 50 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions (3), with seven of the 10 largest coal consumers located in the region (4)
- It is home to 14 of the 20 countries most vulnerable to climate change (5)
- It accounts for 40 percent of the world's GDP and 54 percent of the global population (6)
- It contains 17 of the 36 global biodiversity hotspots (7)



The frequency and intensity of tsunamis, cyclones, and floods in the Indo-Pacific have increased exponentially in recent years, displacing populations and significantly affecting geographically vulnerable areas. The region contains the world's largest concentration of marine life, the most extensive collection of mangrove forests, and a wealth of other resources. Countries in this area depend heavily on these natural assets for long-term economic growth. However, environmental degradation poses a significant threat to these resources. In 2022, extreme weather events were linked to approximately 7,500 deaths, affecting over 64 million people worldwide and causing an estimated US\$57 billion in damages (8).

Given these facts, it is imperative for partners, such as India and France, to prioritise resilience in the Indo-Pacific. Resilience is a crucial link between the region's security and sustainable development agendas. It addresses the identified needs of counterparties in sustainable development and aligns with the strategic positioning of more advanced countries. Resilience calls for reevaluating existing solutions and encourages innovative funding mechanisms for development. By embedding resilience into the core of the Indo-Pacific agenda, stakeholders can devise new tools and partnerships to address climate challenges effectively. The Indo-Pacific, bridging the Indian and Pacific Oceans, creates a diverse community of more than 40 countries, ranging from emerging economies to island nations. This diversity necessitates tailored and collaborative approaches to build climate resilience and ensure sustainable development in the face of escalating environmental threats. The pressing question is how policymaking and development financing in the region can strengthen sustainable development. Specifically, led by India and France, can cooperation on elements of the SDG agenda in this region concentrate development finance efforts and utilise or transcend the security agenda as required?

In 2022, the Bali Agenda for Resilience highlighted key vulnerabilities in the Indo-Pacific region, revealing that only half of the countries reporting against Sendai Framework targets indicated having fit-for-purpose, accessible, and actionable disaster risk information (9). Placing resilience

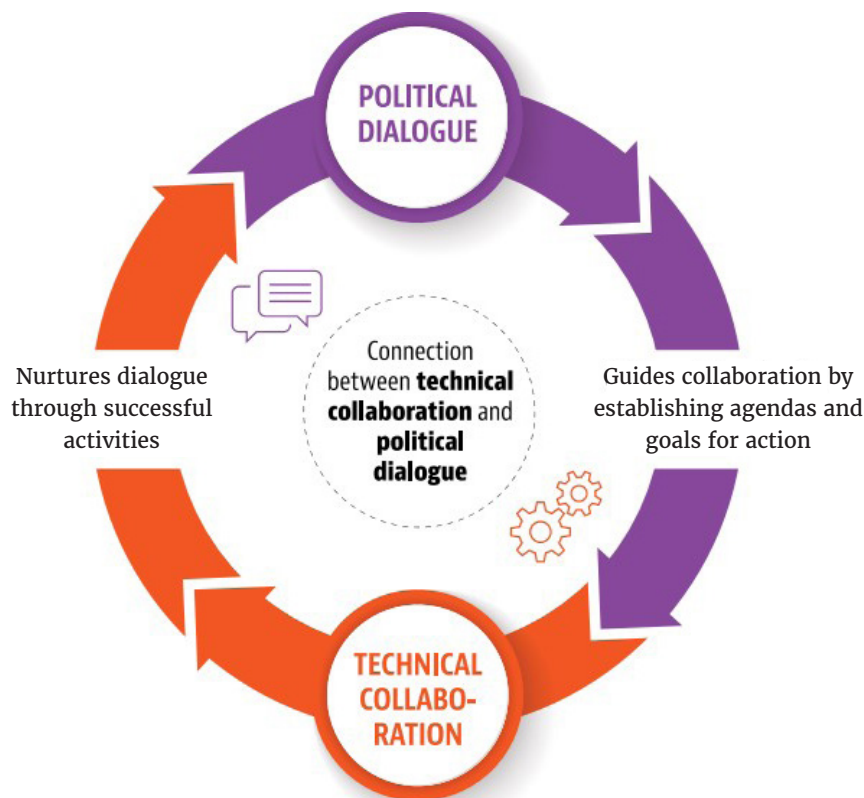
at the core of Indo-Pacific strategies allows for considering new tools and partnerships. It encourages reflecting on adaptation finance and the criteria for resilience finance in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on nature-based solutions, emphasising the risk reduction dimension of disasters, and exploring climate-security development links in the region. At a policy level, like-minded nations have an opportunity to devise a coherent development agenda that fits within the broader geoeconomic matrix. This policy direction can be partially implemented through collaboration between public development banks and development finance institutions. Directing development finance into these channels will create an inclusive, sustainable development framework in the Indo-Pacific that responds to national aspirations, economic needs, financial efficiency, and sovereign requirements.

### Trilateral Cooperation in Sustainable Development

Several elements are key to making triangular cooperation in development a success. First, it requires strong coordination with the beneficiary country to understand their needs and projects. The project should be part of the recipient country's development plan and on the country's request. Then, the sectoral or thematic focus is defined based on each actor's core priorities, approaches, and other key strategy documents. Regarding modalities, a three-party governance mechanism (like a fund) can enhance the credibility and sustainability of the intervention. For instance, an effort could be identified to co-finance or finance several project components in parallel. However, even if triangular cooperation is easily announced, implementing it takes time. Realistic timeframes for implementation are needed to ensure a good match between what partners can provide and what is required for the third country. Coordination among donors is needed to share lessons from trilateral initiatives and support joint dialogue on overseas and trilateral cooperation. Trilateral cooperation is technical diplomacy: political dialogue guides technical collaboration by establishing agendas and goals for action and setting a broader framework for action, while technical collaboration nurtures political dialogues by providing meaningful examples of successful activities (see Figure 1).

Finally, the strength of the bilateral relationships between the three countries is also crucial for the effectiveness and functionality of the trilateral cooperation.

Figure 1: Triangular Cooperation is Technical Diplomacy



Source: OECD/IsDB (10).

Notably, in official communication, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi refers to “plurilateral arrangements” and not trilateral cooperation, for example, between India and France, with Australia and the UAE aiming to “build new ones in the region” (11). According to Shairee Malhotra and Thibaut Fournol (12), using the term “plurilateralism instead of simply referring to trilateral dialogues...injects a more political and more conceptual dimension into initiatives that had previously been described primarily to their nature”. According to the authors, this term is not part of the French strategic lexicon but rather the Indian lexicon.

## India and France Triangular Development Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

India has a long-standing history of cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region in areas such as non-traditional security, infrastructure, and disaster relief operations. France also has a history of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the FRANZ arrangement with Australia and New Zealand in 1992, working in third countries in instances of natural disasters (with Papua New Guinea in 1998, with Fiji in 2003, 2012, and 2016, with the Solomon Islands in 2003, with Niue in 2004, and with Vanuatu in 2010 and 2015). India and France are members of the same international organisations in the Indian Ocean (the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Indian Ocean Commission) focusing on sustainable development and maritime security.

Several documents presented trilateral cooperation in sustainable development as central to the India-France relationship. In the 'Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region' released in 2018, trilateral dialogues are mentioned at point 6 under bilateral and international coordination ("the two leaders are desirous of associating other strategic partners in the growing cooperation between India and France, as and when required and, in this regard, would establish trilateral dialogues") (13).

During an official visit to India in September 2022, France's then Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Catherine Colonna underlined the importance of triangular cooperation in a speech: "We have in mind other such formats with shared partners, which can be useful. We are also discussing various joint cooperation projects with third countries in the Indian Ocean, in East Africa and in the Pacific." She also mentioned the trilateral exchange between India, France and Australia: "It allows us to reset our trilateral exchanges with both India and Australia, which has great potential" (14).

In January 2023, to mark the 25th anniversary of the Indo-French strategic partnership, a joint statement stated that “trilateral cooperation with like-minded partners in the region will be a key pillar of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region in particular through the dialogue launched with the United Arab Emirates, a strategic partner for both countries, on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023 at ministerial level, as well as with Australia, launched in September 2020” (15).

Finally, the joint statement released following French President Emmanuel Macron’s visit to India in January 2024 also mentions triangular cooperation: “they also committed to revitalizing the trilateral cooperation with Australia, deepen the one with UAE and explored new ones in the region” (16).

Three trilateral cooperation projects in the Indo-Pacific illustrate the India-France partnership for the planet.

- **The Indo-Pacific Park Partnerships:** In its pilot phase, the programme involves the French Development Agency, Office National des Forêts International (French National Forest Office), and the Assam Forest Department. It aims to bolster Assam’s capabilities, forge enduring partnerships with French conservation practitioners, and provide technical aid for sustainable protected area management, focusing on the Kaziranga and Manas National Parks. Such a partnership fosters knowledge exchange and collaboration in biodiversity conservation. Through exposure tours and workshops, stakeholders implement sustainable practices, emphasising the significance of collective efforts in preserving biodiversity and combating climate change.
- **Indo-Pacific Triangular Cooperation Fund:** This project aims to “support India-based innovators and start-ups in taking their innovations to third countries, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region” (17). The focus is on climate- and SDGs-related innovations to facilitate the scaling up of green technologies being developed in the region. Both countries will jointly identify the projects to be supported through the Fund.

- **SUFIP:** Held in Paris in February 2022 for its first edition, the SUFIP is a gathering of peers that seeks to develop mechanisms for collaboration on implementing a sustainability agenda in the Indo-Pacific. Its main objective is to share views on the common issues that comprise the sustainability agenda in the Indo-Pacific and the initiation of a process that harmonises the tools and approaches used to address them. The first edition of the SUFIP conference was launched by the French Development Agency and the India Exim Bank in Paris in February 2022 as the first step towards building a common and sustainable agenda for the Indo-Pacific with third countries. The conference attempted to map and bring together relevant stakeholders from public financial institutions and development banks. More than 500 participants from 27 countries, including representatives of 21 development financial institutions, attended the conference, underscoring the importance of this question for the region. The second edition of the conference was held in Bangkok in June 2024, bringing together European and Indo-Pacific development banks and resilience actors. Additionally, the SUFIP Development Network was officially launched in March 2023.

Other initiatives contributing to the development agenda of the Indo-Pacific are also worth mentioning, including the trilateral between India-France-Australia launched in September 2020, which is the “absolute key to frame the region and frame our common interests in the Indo-Pacific,” with Australia and India being described as “critical partners to this New Indo-Pacific alliance” (18). It is seconded by a track 1.5 dialogue, structured around five cooperation themes: maritime security, humanitarian resources in disasters, blue economy, marine resources and environment, and multilateralism. Focal points meetings were organised to operationalise the cooperation.

Finally, triangular cooperation can also happen within inter-governmental organisations. For instance, India and France rely on close cooperation and involvement in the International Solar Alliance to support third countries in their solar programmes, mainly through the Star-C Programme and the creation of a solar academy in Senegal through joint research and development.

## The Way Ahead

By fostering such collaborative efforts, as between India and France, the Indo-Pacific can enhance its resilience against climate and other external shocks, ensuring the region's sustainable and inclusive future. Improving the trajectory of climate change resilience will preserve the socio-ecological system despite various pressures. Within the framework of climate change resilience, several concrete objectives emerge in the short-, medium-, and long-term that could feed the trilateral cooperation agenda in the future:

- **Limiting human damage related to climate change:** Preserving populations is the main priority of climate resilience strategies (19). This objective is concretised by considering and protecting the most vulnerable groups, protecting the essential means of subsistence for the populations, or through effective emergency procedures during natural disasters.
- **Limiting environmental and physical loss and damage related to climate change and the cost to countries, regions, and communities:** This objective can be achieved by enhancing the resistance of ecosystems and infrastructures to extreme weather events or their capacity to absorb them (such as boosting the resistance of buildings, protecting dwellings, and expanding the size of sewer systems to counter extreme rains).
- **Preserving development opportunities:** This objective is particularly relevant to developing countries. Actions to improve resilience to climate change should focus on limiting the damage caused by climate change and preserving the opportunities for countries and communities to develop. This can be achieved through the preservation of capital and human resources, opportunities for innovation, and the use of space for economic activities.

- **Preserving and improving living conditions:** The latter refers to the sustainability of socio-ecological systems and development opportunities (understood as access to a better quality of life for as many people as possible). Preserving the quality of water, air, ecosystems and the services they provide can achieve this.

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# Furthering India-Australia Triangular Partnership in the Indo-Pacific

Kate Clayton and Ambika Vishwanath

**A**s the Indo-Pacific region becomes more competitive and uncertain, cooperation will be crucial in responding to regional crises. As the most climate-vulnerable region, the cascading effects of climate change can potentially cause a regional crisis, which is likely to affect trade and other more traditional forms of security and defence structures (1). Triangular cooperation between India, Australia, and the Pacific Islands will ensure that the states work together effectively to respond to shared climate change challenges. A triangular approach to development that centres on a demand-driven approach and the needs of recipient countries builds on local resilience and offers a sustainable approach to aid. By building upon pre-existing climate change-related programmes, such as renewable energy infrastructure and disaster resilience, and collectively exploring new avenues to mitigate long-term risks, India, Australia and the Pacific

Islands can enhance habits of cooperation on shared issues, strengthening regional peace, stability, and prosperity during crisis.

### **Approaches to Development: Australia and India**

Despite being an aid recipient country, India has an old tradition of development partnerships since the early ages of its nation-building. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC), launched in 1964, is still among its most successful. The values and underlying concepts of India's aid were need- and demand-based, finding a deep connection with other former colonial countries. This model, where India responds to the needs of the recipient country, continues today and has served to establish the country as a trusted partner. India's development partnership model is human-centric and collaborative and involves several instruments, including capacity building and support to ensure the longevity of projects, establishing centres of excellence, extending lines of credit, and working with the UN Development Partnership Fund for least developed countries, among others (2). With decades of success across Africa and Asia, India has, in recent years, expanded its outreach and relationships across the Indo-Pacific region, especially the Pacific Islands and small island developing states (SIDS).

This demand-driven partnership model has also found space in the multilateral institutions India has spearheaded or led, such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the G20. In particular, the demand-driven approach is prominent within the trilateral and minilateral development model that the present Modi government favours. This model could prompt India's development partner countries to adopt the same approach. For India, a trilateral or minilateral approach with many options are a necessary response to the global polycrisis. An analysis of India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's remarks and speeches on several occasions shows that such an approach presents policymakers, governments, and funders with options to make better choices and share the aid burden to build lasting relationships (3, 4). It is also clear that

for India, collaboration allows for a wider gamut of tools and capacities to address emerging challenges, utilising financial, technical, and human resources.

In Australia, triangular partnerships are yet to be utilised with as much enthusiasm and institutional focus as in India. Australia's preferred mode of development is either unilaterally with development partner countries to support state building and state capacity, or within multilateral groupings (such as the Quad and the UN Development Programme), regional banks, and other developed country-led initiatives (5). Australia is the leading aid donor in the Pacific Islands region, delivering close to AUD2 billion (US\$1.3 billion) in aid and assistance (6), opting to work with Pacific governments and civil society organisations. Other examples of development collaborators in the region for Australia include the Asian Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Quad.

Australia launched a new International Development Policy in August 2023, which included the policy themes of climate change and new strategies on gender equality, disability, and LGBTQIA+. This is alongside a pre-existing commitment that 80 percent of Australia's investment will ensure gender equality, and at least half will have a climate change objective. The policy also signalled a shift towards more locally-led development, including through civil society partnerships, a new humanitarian strategy to respond to crises, and strengthened climate targets for development programmes (7).

### **Building and Strengthening Triangular Partnerships in the Pacific**

Australia's engagement with India has enhanced over the past five years, with the relationship upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2020. This was coupled with increased engagement through other platforms, notably the Quad, India-Australia-France trilateral, and India-Australia-Indonesia trilateral (8). The India-Australia bilateral relationship is the strongest it has ever been, presenting an opportunity for states to

build on this momentum and work together on triangular partnerships in the Pacific.

The Lowy Pacific Aid Map (9) highlights that between 2008 and 2022, Australia spent AUD18.8 billion (US\$12 billion) in the region, only just falling short of its AUD20.6 billion (US\$13.1 billion) commitment. This sees Australia as the largest aid donor in the region, with a share of 38 percent. The next state with the largest aid spent is China, at AUD 4 billion (US\$2.5 billion), against an AUD10.6 billion (US\$6.5 billion) commitment, holding only 9 percent of the region's development spending share. Conversely, India has spent AUD105 million (US\$66.8 million) after committing AUD589 million (US\$375 million) to the region. Across the region, development programmes focus on funding for government and civil society, health, and education.

Although India has had a long-standing relationship with the Pacific Islands, seen within the gamut of the erstwhile Look East and present Act East policies, the region has not been a high priority for New Delhi (10). This is despite a significant proportion of the Pacific population having historical links to the country. However, with the Indo-Pacific gaining greater significance for India in the last decade, engagement with the Pacific Islands has increased. Once primarily based on cultural and people-to-people ties, cooperation between India and the Pacific has now expanded to include climate, sustainable development, renewable energy, trade and several other sectors (11). In 2023, India co-hosted the third summit of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC). Launched in 2014, FIPIC is a multilateral platform for engagement between India and the Pacific Islands, mainly focusing on climate change adaptation, clean energy, solar projects, gender, and disaster management (12). Following the mutual-benefit demand-driven model, the focus has also been on the sustainability of projects recognising the island's extreme vulnerability to climate hazards.

Australia can work to support and bolster Indian engagement and expertise in the region through the triangular partnership model. It can partner

with India and the Pacific Islands as a natural extension of its current development work and foreign policy. As the largest state and donor in the Pacific, Australia can work with India to increase its knowledge and connections in the region, carving out a greater space for Indian development partners. This will work to not only strengthen India's knowledge of the region but also diversify development partners for the Pacific Islands, which are currently dependent on a handful of partners. It will also bring new ideas and perspectives to the region to drive innovation. As Australia looks to combat its colonial legacies in the region (13), cooperating with India to further the demand-driven South-South cooperation model can help circumvent criticisms related to its history. Australia can learn from India's approach to triangular partnerships to create more balanced and sustainable development partnerships.

### **Triangular Partnerships Supporting Shared Interests**

As the Indo-Pacific becomes increasingly more uncertain, particularly with the change in leadership in the US, India and Australia should step up their engagement in the Pacific. Both countries share interests and values regarding climate change, sustainable development, and gender, which need to be boosted with financial and other resources, especially amid an impending decrease in the US's development footprint and substantial cuts in aid and assistance budgets among European donors (14). As growing middle powers, India and Australia have an important role in ensuring peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

Cooperation between the Pacific Islands and India is still maturing, with most development programmes led by traditional donor countries, such as those in the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) group (15). South-South cooperation is not necessarily the driver of these programmes, presenting a significant gap in perception and perspectives that must be addressed. There is currently a gap in Australia's development and cooperation network to support South-South relations, and a triangular partnership with India and the Pacific Islands could work to strengthen Australia's

involvement and support of South–South development programmes. The India–Australia bilateral space has grown in the past five years, and it is only natural to expand current programmes aligned with the emerging challenges of climate risks and resilience and their intersection with traditional security (16). Development cooperation as a growing form of diplomacy allows for a mix of channels to remain active even when political relationships might change. Within these new avenues, gender has become an important cross-cutting issue that both countries have committed to in their own spheres of activity and interest.

Under the women-led development banner promoted during India’s G20 presidency in 2023, India has increased its budget for gender-related policies and programmes. In 2024–25, gender budgeting accounted for 1 percent of India’s total budget allocations (17), a 37 percent increase from the previous year. A large portion of this budget is allocated domestically to education, health, water, and employment schemes. While there is no specific data for gender among overseas aid and programmes, gender is a prominent theme in statements and projects. Australia’s Climate Action Strategy promotes a “gender-responsive sustainable development,” with 8 percent of the country’s aid committing to gender equality in investments (18). Bilaterally, at the 2023 India–Australia Annual Summit, both countries committed to “mainstreaming gender equality and advancing women’s empowerment and inclusive leadership,” emphasising the “importance of ensuring efforts to address climate change are inclusive and gender-response” (19).

Australia and India have emphasised their commitment to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, supporting the central role of the Pacific Islands Forum (20). The strategy outlines the Forum’s long-term approach to working together, framing regional cooperation around seven thematic areas (21):

- Political leadership and regionalism,
- People-centred development,

- Peace and security,
- Resource and economic development,
- Climate change and disasters,
- Ocean and environment, and
- Technology and connectivity

Australia and India should use these areas to guide their triangular partnerships, ensuring that development is demand-driven and led by Pacific Island needs, backed by financial, technical and other resources, to create long-term sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific. Australia has become an expert in climate-centred development programmes. It can work alongside India and the Pacific, scaling up existing programmes and expanding them into other areas of the Pacific. India's demand-driven development approach works cohesively with Australia's new locally-led approach. Australia, a traditional development partner in the region, can learn from India's approach as a non-traditional partner in supporting local organisations and ensuring they lead the policy. This triangular partnership should focus on climate change, including (but not limited to) clean energy, sustainable infrastructure, water security, and disaster management to align with the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

## Opportunities for Triangular Partnerships

### Clean Energy and Infrastructure

The two countries can consider a triangular development programme utilising India's expertise and leadership with ISA and Australia's Pacific and climate development knowledge. This could build off the current ISA programme in Fiji, led by India, and focus on integrating gender in climate cooperation within the ITEC courses and Solar Mamas project (22). Australia could work with India to scale up these programmes,



working with partners in the Pacific Islands states, such as Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu, and Tonga. This would align with Australia's Civil Society Partnerships Fund and the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific, and offer an international dimension to the newly announced India–Australia Renewable Energy Partnership. Further, this would be an India–Australia Solar Taskforce that focuses on low-cost projects with a grassroots approach that can ultimately be integrated into large plans by local partners.

### Disaster Response

The two countries must strengthen triangular cooperation with the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), building off the Quad's cooperation with the group, including conducting workshops on disaster preparedness and energy infrastructure in the SIDS (23). The CDRI and the Quad can bring together Pacific nations with Indian and Australian colleagues to workshop and share disaster resilience approaches. India's decentralised approach to tackling climate challenges, such as creating policies specific to flooding and rising heat, can be contextualised to the Pacific region to inform future disaster mitigation efforts so responses are not only reactive in nature.

### Water Security

Since 2021, India and Australia have been working on bilateral urban water management, focusing on the circularity of water use and management, securing cities, social inclusion, and the exchange of learning and best practices. Both countries face several water-related challenges, which have boosted cooperation at the government level and among universities, technical and research centres, and civil society on water management and security. With a fast-growing urban population, India has implemented several policies and ground-level schemes to improve access and reduce inequality. The success of the bilateral partnership can be expanded to partner countries in the Pacific Islands that are facing similar problems of lack of access and technical knowledge to mitigate risk, as well as demand

management (24). India has several low-cost grassroots programmes that can be adapted to the Pacific context and matched with Australia's regional knowledge and networks. As part of its capacity-building efforts, India has sent long-term deputations to regional agencies to aid in agricultural development, which can be expanded to urban water (25). There is an opportunity for the Australia-India Joint Water Task Force to develop into a Regional Water Task Force that addresses long-term water security within the gamut of climate resilience and gender empowerment.

### A World in Flux

Under the second Donald Trump presidency, the US could decrease its development aid and curb its programmes and engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Trump has outlined his intentions to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement again, alongside taking a more isolated approach to foreign policy (26). The Heritage Foundation, an influential think tank for the Trump administration, has outlined a Pacific Islands strategy for the US that centres their interpretation of national interests, not issues that matter to Pacific islanders (27). While the report acknowledges that "climate issues [are] so important to the Pacific Islands" and mentions the 2018 Boe Declaration, which states that climate change is the biggest threat to security in the region, it notes that climate change in the Pacific Islands is not an American interest and critiques the Biden administration's Pacific focus on climate change. Therefore, climate change is not expected to become a hallmark of US programmes in the region. As the US retracts from the region, the gains made on climate change, gender, and ties with the Pacific Islands under the Biden administration could be lost.

With a more conservative trend in Europe, there will likely be budget cuts for overseas development aid and assistance and a greater push for traditional defence and security. While the European Union has an Indo-Pacific strategy, launched in 2021 (28), it is unclear if there will be any change or what level of resources will be allocated. Australia and India can use this opportunity to strengthen their engagement with the Pacific,

filling in some of the gaps left by a more isolationist American foreign policy and disrupted global order.

As traditional development partners in the Pacific likely withdraw in some capacity from the region, this offers a chance to rethink how states conduct development in the Pacific. While the Partners in the Blue Pacific was created as an informal grouping for donor countries to strengthen their development programmes and support Pacific regionalism (29), it was criticised for “co-opting the Blue Pacific narrative” and “ignoring regional decision-making processes” (30). Triangular development cooperation that is demand-driven and utilises skills from Global South partners could be a key option in the development toolbox for Pacific states, addressing and course-correcting from previous criticisms and failures of collaborative approaches. This will also help diversify development options as the Pacific region becomes more competitive and crowded. Further, India’s proven track record of triangular cooperation, as seen with its programmes with Germany and the EU in Africa, demonstrates the success of its demand-driven South-South development focus. A more empowered Pacific region with more traditional and non-traditional development partner options creates a nimbleness needed in the coming years to ensure that present and emerging crises can be more effectively tackled.

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# Triangular Partnerships in the Infrastructure Sector

Gurjit Singh

**I**ndia and some partner countries held trilateral discussions for over a decade, particularly with Africa in mind. Since 2016, there has been a greater impetus for coordinating development cooperation with India to make a bigger impact in the Global South, mainly Africa (1), and to a small extent in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Pacific regions.

There are three broad reasons for this. First, the G7 countries are losing traction in some areas of influence in Africa and the South Pacific. The Europeans want to expand their footprint in ASEAN, where Japan is the leader. Their biggest challenger is China, which has, over the last two decades, become the leading economic partner for Africa and ASEAN and is making dents in the South Pacific. China invested heavily in infrastructure in many of these regions and countries and coalesced these into the Belt

and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. Since then, China's efforts to expand an infrastructure push in these regions of the Global South—focusing on ports, railways, roads, buildings, industrial parks, and the like—have been the primary influence in these regions and remain so despite recurrent problems (2).

The inability of the G7 countries to make an impact by themselves in the contemporary Global South and the China challenge resulted in many of these countries turning to India as a partner, primarily focusing on Africa. This is because India's cooperation model is quieter but more successful and better accepted by African countries (3).

India places African priorities ahead of other considerations. Indian investment has generated employment and increased regional trade and technology transfers far more than any other partner. The lines of credit contributed to some infrastructure development, particularly in water supply and drainage activities (4). African countries find India to be a partner that can be emulated, unlike a G7 country or China; therefore, the validity of India's development cooperation is accepted. The ultimate acknowledgement of this is that many G7 countries reach out to India to intensify trilateral cooperation, buttressed by the fact that India is not seen as a challenge to the G7 value systems, unlike China (5). India is seen as a democracy with a judicial, parliamentary system supporting democratic values. Thus, co-opting India into dealing with the development problems of Africa, for instance, serves a political purpose as well (6).

This essay focuses mainly on the infrastructure aspects of the leading trilateral arrangements. Ideally, a trilateral arrangement would have India as a development partner, a G7 or other well-endowed and similar-minded country as a financial and technological partner, and a recipient partner in the Global South. However, many of the trilaterals are among India and G7 or other developed countries by themselves, who then focus on a region of the Global South. Among them are the India-France and related trilaterals, the India-Japan-Australia trilateral, the India-Indonesia-Australia trilateral, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), and the India-



Japan-US trilateral. The EU-led Global Gateway, the G7-led Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (Build Back Better), and the India-EU and EU-Japan connectivity partnerships can also be considered since they look at infrastructure directly.

### Assessing Existing Trilaterals

The July 2023 India-France Indo-Pacific Roadmap set the tone for expanding trilateral cooperation into the Indo-Pacific and beyond Africa (7). Unlike other partners, France is keener to engage India in ASEAN, South Pacific and the Indian Ocean region rather than Africa, where it still believes it has sway and does not open up to India much (8). Besides driving this trilateral to a broader region, it also brought in two other trilaterals, one with Australia in 2020 and the other with UAE in 2023. Furthering cooperation, including under the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative (IPOI) (9) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) mechanisms, is included. India, France, UAE, and Australia are part of the IORA. France leads the marine resources pillar, and Australia leads the marine ecology pillar within IPOI (10).

The India-France-Australia trilateral is mainly viewed through the lens of Indo-Pacific security, focusing on the three pillars of trilateral cooperation: maritime safety and security, marine and environmental cooperation, and multilateral engagement. Infrastructure development is not a salient part of its agenda, although collaboration through the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure is mentioned in paragraph 7 of the trilateral declaration (11). The cooperation is seen as a strategic endeavour to counterbalance China's BRI by promoting more transparent and sustainable cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Similarly, India-France-UAE trilateral cooperation has the potential to address infrastructure needs, particularly in the maritime domain (12). France's Indo-Pacific strategy emphasises connectivity and sustainable development, while the UAE's strategic location and financial capacity position it as a key player in Gulf-to-Asia infrastructure corridors.

India's experience in developing countries can complement these efforts. However, the key focus areas remain energy and sustainability; related infrastructure could be imaginatively pursued.

India has four main trilaterals with Japan, some of which are now subsumed into others. The India-Japan-Australia trilateral (13), primarily operational between 2015 and 2017, focused on coordinating the three countries' respective policies on the Indo-Pacific and seeing how to deal with the Chinese challenge. When the US pivoted towards Asia, this trilateral was subsumed into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). No trilateral meeting has taken place since 2017. However, after their initial political and security thrust, the India-Australia-Japan trilateral focused more on economic issues, notably supply chain resilience, through the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative. This aspect, too, seems to have run aground and not progressed due to a lack of attitudinal and economic complementarities (14). Importantly, strengthening regional connectivity remains an objective for India, Australia, Japan, and the US, whether in a trilateral or quadrilateral framework.

The India-Japan-US trilateral also spoke about maritime security, maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, connectivity, and infrastructure development. The countries even established a trilateral infrastructure working group in 2018. During a visit to Washington that year, this author's interaction with various interlocutors elicited no information on the purpose and direction of this working group. It does not seem to have grown substantially and largely remains an idea (15). Notably, a common intention requires substantial coordination work to get different systems to respond to a broad notion.

On the other hand, the Australia-Japan-US trilateral infrastructure partnership (TIP) made efforts to meet with Vietnam as part of the bid to invest in projects in the Indo-Pacific (16) to build infrastructure and coherence. While Australia was led by its Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Export Finance Australia, the US put forward the International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC), and Japan was led by the

Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) over the 2020–2022 period. They were to mobilise investments in projects that would ultimately support the free and open Indo-Pacific (FoIP) priorities, such as infrastructure, energy, transportation, tourism and technology. To pursue these in 2022, the three countries renewed their trilateral infrastructure partnership (17) and said they would work through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) and the Quad. The TIP considered projects in Papua New Guinea (PNG) (18). In April 2019, the TIP visited PNG to identify projects and shortlisted a new liquefied natural gas project for US\$1 billion, with plans and a location to be finalised by 2022 (19). Australian firm Telstra’s acquisition of Digicel Pacific for high-quality telecommunication services in the South Pacific in 2023 went through with support from TIP financial institutions; Digicel Pacific has 2.5 million subscribers in PNG, Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga and Nauru (20). Export Finance Australia, the JBIC, and USIDFC are leading both projects.

Notably, India is not part of the infrastructure-focused TIP. Still, given that it is a member of the IPEF and Quad, it could associate with the TIP if suitable projects and processes are identified.

Similarly, India, Japan, and Italy also launched a trilateral, mainly focused on the security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. Although the trilateral considers infrastructure and connectivity projects necessary, none have been announced (21). The trilateral appears to fulfil Italy’s desire to have greater visibility in the Indo-Pacific by collaborating with two pivotal players (India and Japan).

Several of the G7 European members partner with ASEAN, either as dialogue partners or as development partners. However, none of them use a trilateral or plurilateral mechanism to work with ASEAN to create a common approach for any notable projects, even if they may be small. This group of countries, or even existing trilaterals, could engage with the ‘Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025’ and consider which projects to pursue. This is missing from the progressive implementation of trilaterals towards infrastructure; these trilaterals mainly remain symbolic manifestations of strategic coherence.

Japan and India also enunciated the AAGC in 2016 (22). This important initiative focused on strategically harnessing larger finance from Japan alongside India's wider reach in Africa, using the tenets of South-South cooperation supported by Japanese financing. While Japan was ready to look at Africa by piggybacking on India's experience there, it was unwilling to offer similar opportunities to India with the ASEAN. Japanese companies need entry into Africa, where India is better accepted. In ASEAN, Japanese interests are well entrenched and do not require Indian support.

However, there were problems with this approach. First, the Japanese viewed it as a private-sector initiative involving joint investments, but no Indian companies were forthcoming. Indian companies viewed the AAGC as an alternative to the line of credit system, which was withering away. The Japanese saw this as a partnership and not as a funding mechanism for Indian companies in Africa. They mainly supported investment and signed 30 memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with the private sector at the 2018 Tokyo International Conference on African Development. These achieved little success. This highlights that Japanese companies could not easily navigate African markets for large projects, even with government financing.

Secondly, had there been enough cohesion between the Indian and Japanese companies working in Africa, Indian firms could have considered subcontracting arrangements with the Japanese companies taking the lead in infrastructure projects. While a few diaspora-owned companies based in Africa could do so, Indian companies (from India) operating in Africa could not, as most of these firms had little engagement with Japanese companies to build the necessary partnerships.

The main problem with the AAGC was that the Japanese viewed it as a think tank-led process, which ultimately had no ownership. While the Japanese subsumed it under the FoIP, it cannot be considered a total loss because private sector companies in both countries continue to engage. For instance, the Japan External Trade Organization and Confederation of Indian Industry set up a portal to connect interested Indian and Japanese

companies. However, there is no formal government-to-government engagement like with Germany, the UK, and France for either grant projects or impact investing.

It is prudent to consider two other trilaterals involving another developing country besides India—the India-USA-Afghanistan (23) and the India-Indonesia-Australia trilaterals.

While not formally focused on infrastructure, the most significant impact of the India-US-Afghanistan trilateral is that of infrastructure creation undertaken by India in Afghanistan. After the US entered Afghanistan, India was its strong development partner. India and the US already had a triangular cooperation framework underway through the US Agency for International Development, which covered capacity building, innovation, dairy and seed development, health and women's empowerment, among other things (24). This was not infrastructural in nature but provided the ambience for India and the US to work in Afghanistan, including on programmes dealing with women's empowerment.

Under the overall coherence of India and the US working together in the years the Taliban was kept at bay, India undertook five large infrastructure projects in Afghanistan within its overall US\$3 billion investments in the country (25). These included the Afghanistan parliament (inaugurated in 2016); the Salma Dam in Herat, which provides irrigation and power to the province and was inaugurated in 2016; the restoration of the Star Palace, a century-old heritage building, in 2016; and the restoration of the largest paediatric hospital in Afghanistan, which was first built in 1985. The 218-km Zaranj-Delaram highway, which is close to the border with Iran, was one of the most significant projects undertaken. It links Iran's Chabahar port, an alternative connectivity project, to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The Chabahar port and the highway provide ocean access to the International North-South Transport Corridor to Central Asia. The 220-kilowatt transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri in the Baghlan province to Kabul was part of India's involvement in the power sector, which also restored telecommunication lines and substation infrastructure in many provinces.

Though these were all funded by India, they were under the cover of a collaboration with the US in a strategic sense and, thus, trilateral in thought. Even after the US hastily withdrew in 2021 and the Taliban returned, this infrastructure in Afghanistan has immense value and is the basis of the Taliban wanting to connect with India at present. Therefore, the value of infrastructure in any trilateral cooperation is perhaps the most enduring impact, even when strategic views begin to differ.

The India-Indonesia-Australia trilateral dialogue meets regularly through its focal points, most recently in July 2024. They focus on collaboration between the IPOI and IORA to examine the blue economy, marine pollution, and marine domain awareness. The India-ASEAN MOU on cooperation between the IPOI and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) (26). is a stepping stone to further develop this trilateral. Workshops and visits are exchanged under this mechanism. The trilateral held its first formal meeting virtually in September 2020 with the foreign ministers in attendance and then in person at the 2022 UN General Assembly. Although Indonesia was initially hesitant, it has become more confident about engaging India and Australia in an ASEAN Plus policy after the AoIP was approved by ASEAN, even though it simultaneously engages Indonesia with two Quad partners. The ambit of this trilateral is the Indo-Pacific, but it currently focuses on meetings and workshops and not yet on projects.

There are emerging rays of hope for Indonesia-centred trilateral or plurilateral infrastructure projects in the region. Holding the first ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum (AIPF) (27). Under Indonesia's chairmanship of the ASEAN and East Asia Summit in Jakarta in September 2023, a new initiative was to position ASEAN as the centre of prosperity and economic linkages in the wider Indo-Pacific. For this, ASEAN is now significantly transitioning beyond the traditional Asia-Pacific concept. Indonesia identified cooperation projects worth US\$32 billion through business matching activities during the AIPF. In addition, at the flagship event of the 43rd ASEAN Summit in 2023, Indonesia sought cooperation from other countries for projects totalling US\$810 million (28). This was to bring forth the role of the private sector and partners other than China to embrace the Indo-Pacific

as a functional rather than strategic concept. Private sector groups from various countries, including a large contingent from Australia, attended the AIPF. India focused on the digital economy at the AIPF. The forum will likely continue, and the US is considering becoming its partner.

Although India's bilateral efforts at infrastructure building in Afghanistan were under a strategic consensus with the US, it has also undertaken several infrastructure projects in its neighbourhood, including in Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, as well as Mauritius and Seychelles. Most of the infrastructure in Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and the Maldives has been built through grants. In the case of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Mauritius, there are more lines of credit and loans. Although India has been sceptical of involving third countries in its neighbourhood, the BRI has made great strides and brought financing into the neighbourhood, overwhelming Indian efforts (even if it is expanding), forcing a rethink. Therefore, some effort is necessary for trilateral engagement. However, India's efforts to work with Myanmar and Thailand for infrastructure projects such as the trilateral highway were unsuccessful.

India and Japan have been discussing trilateral cooperation in South Asia, particularly in Myanmar (before the 2021 coup), Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. India and Japan have a common approach to challenging the BRI and believe combining their strategies and financing arrangements can take projects forward. While these projects have not yet succeeded, they include ideas in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and contribute to regional connectivity around the Bay of Bengal.

Among the reasons that Japan is ready to collaborate with India in these countries is because there is substantial Indian financial participation there already and, therefore, a trend to follow. This is the importance of trilateral cooperation: India must provide financial muscle to hold its weight in the trilateral arrangement. Besides, its ability to deliver better, be more cost-effective and relevant to the concerned developing country remains valid.

## The Way Forward

Will infrastructure cooperation remain a dream? Is regional connectivity an ideal pursuit? Consider two examples. The BRI has several projects in ASEAN countries (29). Which of these projects have contributed to regional connectivity? The flagship CPEC may be considered a regional connectivity project for China, Pakistan, and the Arabian Sea, but it has many problems. To the east of India, even the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (between Kunming in China and Sittwe Port in Myanmar) slowed down due to issues in Myanmar. Other BRI projects pursued in ASEAN cannot be viewed as regional connectivity projects because they focus on domestic connectivity, such as the Bandung-Jakarta railway in Indonesia.

Similarly, Japan invested in the infrastructure of many ASEAN countries, including ports and airports. There is no trans-ASEAN connectivity, which has been built by either ASEAN or any of its partners. The Japan-India-US trilateral (30) has mostly disappeared, though it was spoken of highly around 2017-19. It has not undertaken any infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific and now appears to have been subsumed into the Quad.

Therefore, even efforts by the big powers to have connectivity positing as a regional project have yet to fructify in any meaningful manner. To expect India to take this to the next level, alone or with its partners, requires a better understanding. For this, three main criteria are important: first, the availability of value chains based on domestic production bases; second, a much greater enthusiasm of the Indian private sector in the areas where such connectivity is built; and third, to differentiate between hard and soft sovereignty issues. For instance, dealing with ASEAN is soft sovereignty as it is a functional construct. Dealing with China and Myanmar is hard sovereignty because security interests are involved.

The infrastructure sector needs to be pursued with a medium-term outlook. Some high-visibility projects with India's partners should be chosen in consultation with African host governments and their pan-African or regional institutions. The same should be done with the ASEAN countries as



well. These projects should be a part of each region's priorities emanating from Africa's 'Agenda 2063' and the 'Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025'. During India's discussion with its partners, these should be put on the agenda to create an ambience where public-private partnerships (PPP) or business-to-business arrangements can fructify. This will develop the India-EU connectivity programme or add to the Global Gateway and the US-led Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment that offers to provide US\$40 trillion worth of infrastructure required by developing countries by 2035.

Government-backed financial institutions and regional and international financing institutions can create a development fund to finance feasibility studies for such potential projects. The availability of such a fund would allow India and its partners to discuss with African/ASEAN partners to decide on projects for which feasibility studies and detailed project reports can be developed. A hybrid financing system must emerge to reduce debt stress by combining grants, loans, foreign direct investment (FDI), and guarantees. The availability of bankable studies for a short list of projects will make it easier to attract trilateral or plurilateral project finance from different partners. Host governments must provide land and maintenance budgets as the framework for PPP or build-operate-transfer models.

India and its partners need to coordinate their procurement processes. Guarantees could be provided to mitigate the risks for participating companies. Each partner could designate a development finance institution to represent it, prioritise support for these landmark projects, and provide the necessary guarantees. One way to do so is by establishing special-purpose vehicles for bankable projects. Various guarantee systems could be prioritised once host governments offer local support and clearances. This would require different institutions to have some flexibility in their current operating styles.

Similarly, for large projects, low-cost development finance will be necessary. This must be coordinated among partners who agree to implement a

project from the developed shortlist. This would require lending agencies to coordinate their diverse practices and procurement systems among the partners. Each partner must also introduce flexibility in their procurement system for faster disbursement and commitment.

India's model of development cooperation and its democratic values made India an attractive development partner for the G7 countries, which were increasingly overshadowed by growing Chinese influence in the developing world. Consequently, a series of triangular agreements followed. For these partnerships to succeed in the infrastructure sector, financing institutions in developed countries must partner more closely with similar agencies in India and the host country.

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# India's Pivotal Role in Triangular Partnerships in Health: Evidence and Promise

Lakshmy Ramakrishnan

**T**riangular cooperation is a southern-steered development partnership between two or more developing countries and a developed country or multilateral organisation aimed at facilitating southern countries to attain their development capabilities (1). India's role in triangular partnerships in the health sector extends to African and Asian countries and involves collaboration through UN systems and government agencies. India demonstrated remarkable capabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and southern partners have repeatedly voiced the need for more alliances to address critical health issues, indicating promise. There remains hesitancy, however, in expanding these projects into large-scale ones, owing to a lack of systematic empirical evidence to assess the performance of triangular cooperation projects and a limited definition of what constitutes triangular cooperation, restricting its potential (2).

Triangular cooperation encompasses collective action from various actors through “exchanges of knowledge, skills, resources, technical know-how” (3). Northern-led projects are cast as Western-oriented, where discourses suitable for developed economies dominate and invariably augment existing challenges in developing economies (4). Contrastingly, triangular cooperation is a fitting strategy for the Global South as it encompasses a mutual recognition of development capabilities without the need for adherence to specific conditions, resulting in the all-round development of partner countries (5).

### Marching Towards Global Health Equity

New Delhi was previously hesitant to partake in development partnerships with traditional donors and showed a preference for bilateral engagements, but with China’s vast global footprint, this view has taken a backseat (6). Triangular cooperation under UN-led measures is a preferred system for India, and India has proactively shaped funds for southern projects (7). Engagement with traditional donors—the US and the UK—reflect India’s foreign policy objectives to employ development as a strategic tool. This is driven by India’s need to portray itself as a responsible global power and its aspirations for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council (8). Further, China’s Health Silk Road triggered competitiveness between India and China to place smaller southern economies within their respective spheres of influence.

Strengthening health systems by providing access to adequate and affordable healthcare are key features of India’s development strategies (9). Notably, India’s ability to produce affordable generic medicines has led it to be referred to as the ‘pharmacy of the world,’ even as its traditional medicine has been identified as an alternative form of healthcare (10). A key triangular cooperation effort is the formation of the IBSA (India, Brazil, and South Africa) Fund, a facility to curb poverty and alleviate hunger, which has engaged in 35 countries focusing on food security, safe drinking water, and HIV/AIDS mitigation (11). Other efforts have addressed

reproductive health, maternal health, and childcare in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). India, through its collaboration with the UN Development Partnership Fund, provided essential maternal and child health services by raising awareness on sexual and reproductive health, training midwives, providing foetal doppler training, and implementing strategies to mitigate sexual violence and abuse against women and girls in Paraguay, Guyana, and Mauritania (12). By addressing these health issues (SDG-3), India can alleviate hardships faced across other sectors, including poverty (SDG-1), nutrition (SDG-2), and equitable access to healthcare (SDG-5) (13). Notably, official development assistance assigned to maternal health dropped in 2020 and 2021, owing to a redirection of funds towards the pandemic (14). Estimates from 2020 show that each day, 800 women lose their lives to childbirth- or pregnancy-related complications, indicating a continued need for triangular cooperation activity in this area (15).

### **Solidarity in the Face of COVID-19**

A joint effort with the Pan American Health Organization (a specialised UN agency) and the governments of Belize and India greatly assisted Belize's COVID-19 response and recovery abilities (16). The efforts contributed to pandemic management, improving Belize's health system, and implementing biomedical waste management (17). Kiribati, Mali, and Tonga had similar experiences owing to the supply of vaccines, cold chain storage facilities, masks, surgical gloves, and medical equipment (18). Knowledge-sharing of a diagnostic tool that could detect COVID-19 in 45 minutes (called GeneXpert) greatly aided Tonga's healthcare system (19). Healthcare robots for disinfection and telemedicine services improved time management and enabled the adoption of new technologies into healthcare systems in the Caribbean (20).

During the vaccination drive, India's COVID-19 Vaccine Intelligence Network (CoWIN) was offered as a digital public good. Digitising the vaccine supply network enabled an "inclusive, resilient and adaptive" response to the

pandemic (21). In collaboration with the UN Development Programme (UNDP), CoWIN was rolled out in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Guyana (22). A health governance initiative in Indonesia led by India and the UNDP (called HEART) supplied oxygen cylinders, bolstered the supply chain management of vaccines, and improved vaccine storage facilities. Concomitantly, with help from Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, India's Electronic Vaccine Intelligence Network (eVIN), which provided real-time information on vaccine stocks and cold chain processes, was also rolled out globally. In Indonesia, eVIN contributed to vaccine coverage in infants and adolescents, with a 90 percent reduction in vaccine stock running out (23).

India prefers UN-based mechanisms as the foundation for its triangular cooperation arrangements but has partnered extensively with the US in Africa. This commitment was reaffirmed by extending the 'Statement of Guiding Principles on Triangular Cooperation for Global Development' to 2026 (24). The US Agency for International Development (USAID) and India's National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management held trainings on food security, dairy management, food processing, and resilient farming practices in Kenya, Liberia, and Malawi (25). Collaboration on the Global Linkages Project in countries such as Angola, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Tanzania addressed reproductive, maternal, child, and adolescent healthcare matters, and HIV/AIDS in a country-specific manner (26).

Similarly, triangular cooperation projects between the UK and India reflect a shared need to accelerate SDG development, which is reaffirmed by the 'Statement of Intent on Partnership for Cooperation in Third Countries' (27). The 'Global Research Partnership on Food and Nutrition Security, Health and Women' and the 'Strategic Health and Nutrition Partnership' recognised the value of cost-effective innovations that India's healthcare and pharmaceutical industries provide and were directed towards evidence-based knowledge-transfer initiatives, including health financing (28). The Global Research Partnership Programme between UK Research and Innovation and India's Department of Biotechnology resulted in



incorporating the CRADLE Vital Signs Alert technology into healthcare systems in Africa and Asia to prevent pre-eclampsia. It has reduced pre-eclampsia levels by more than 40 percent and reduced maternal deaths by over 60 percent in partner countries (29).

Finally, India participates in knowledge cooperation for vaccine development and clinical trials in developing economies through non-state and parastatal actors. The remarkable collaboration between Oxford University, AstraZeneca, and Serum Institute of India in developing COVID-19 vaccines exemplifies India's commitment to addressing global health concerns. COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) is a novel triangular partnership that aimed to supply vulnerable nations with vaccines. India's COVAX endeavour was partially offset by its COVID-19 crisis; however, under COVAX, an estimated 50 million doses were distributed by India worldwide (30). The International Vaccine Institute (IVI) in South Korea applies a triangular cooperation approach to its vaccine development through capacity-building initiatives in LMICs (31). A typhoid conjugate vaccine developed by IVI and its partners in India, Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines completed clinical trials in Nepal. IVI also enabled technology transfers between Indian and Vietnamese researchers during the development of an oral cholera vaccine and the conduct of its clinical trials.

### **Tracing Triangular Cooperation Footprints**

Triangular partnerships hold considerable advantages over traditional projects but are yet to reach their true potential. The traction triangular cooperation has gained in the last decade reflects the changes in the international system—a myriad of global health challenges and a multilateral system in 'crisis' mode. This 'polycrisis' is partially offset through triangular cooperation, and as an attractive development partner in healthcare, India has attracted considerable funding from multilateral organisations (32).

While the UN system hails southern development efforts as ‘central and essential’ and remains India’s preferred partner in triangular cooperation, ‘mainstreaming’ triangular cooperation in the UN system has not occurred yet (33). Mainstreaming refers to putting the triangular cooperation strategy into the core of UN activities to garner more institutional support. This has not happened due to a lack of evidence on the progress of triangular cooperation projects and modest contributions by India. Firstly, there is a lack of understanding of the impact of the modality, which hinders the scaling-up of projects. Traditional South-South cooperation activities focused on impact not through quantifying health outcomes but on the solidarity it brought about (34). The UN system followed this approach, but there is now a need to understand what constitutes ‘successful’ triangular cooperation and for a metric to assess the outcome of triangular cooperation efforts through evidence-based research (35). The lack of ‘systematic comparative evidence’ and a universal framework to monitor and report triangular cooperation projects impede investments (36).

Secondly, the International Monetary Fund estimates that the overall sum (28.3 percent) of the purchasing power parity shares of the US (15 percent) and the European Union (14 percent) will be equivalent to that of China (20.2 percent) and India (8.1 percent) by 2026, but contributions by India to entities like the UNDP have remained moderate compared to Development Assistance Committee member countries (37). However, India’s reluctance to take part in large-scale infrastructural projects may reflect its desire to address its development needs and a willingness to participate in health projects for geostrategic purposes instead of economic ones (38). Thus, in the absence of sufficient data on the success of the modality under UN-based systems, India may prefer to engage with smaller economies with government agencies (such as the USA or the UK) at the triangular level to advance its national interests and geopolitical considerations.

Generalised challenges to triangular cooperation include difficulties in harmonising the political and bureaucratic mechanisms of partner

countries, impediments to project implementation owing to different social and environmental standards, high administrative costs, and variability in the developing partner's willingness (39). A 'differentiated ambivalence'—or an unwillingness displayed by India to determine what constitutes a triangular partnership—is another impediment (40). For instance, several Indian-owned hospitals actively engage in public-private partnerships in Africa, but these rarely fall under triangular cooperation literature during analyses. The private sector is found to engage in multiple projects, is less time-intensive, and provides significant resources. Their exclusion from analyses is likely due to the vast number of players (which challenges systematic data collection) and a lack of awareness among scholars that private entities play a significant role in triangular cooperation in the health sector (41). Thus, an incomplete understanding of what constitutes triangular cooperation limits potential investments.

### Charting the Future

Developing economies confront the burden of addressing health issues under an ecosystem that requires economic growth, faces the deleterious effects of climate change, and needs resilient health systems. Moreover, the quest for solidarity persists among these postcolonial states, paving the way for middle-power engagement. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, India is a preferred partner for African and Asian countries, as evidenced by a “high demand to learn from Indian innovations and expertise,” particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic (42). The African Union's 'Agenda 2063' identified addressing infectious diseases as a critical need for the continent (43). The Africa Vaccine Manufacturers Initiative sought resources to produce vaccines domestically and to enable the conduct of clinical trials locally to “not be running around the world, scouring the whole globe looking for vaccines.” (44) The potential for India to engage in the health sector in Sub-Saharan Africa exists despite China's presence, as the latter has been characterised as lacking in coordination and sophistication in the implementation of projects. Moreover, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor remains dormant,

lacking any sign of revival (45). IVI could be a potential partner for India in Africa as its initiatives empower vulnerable populations to access critical vaccines by providing them with the means and technical know-how to manufacture and test their own vaccines.

Germany's BioNTech's pivotal role in COVID-19 vaccine production and India's vaccine diplomacy demonstrate a mutual compatibility for potential triangular cooperation (46). In this vein, the recent agreement between India and Germany to engage in triangular cooperation in Africa and Latin America is an opportunity to leverage each other's capabilities and innovations (47). India's expertise in healthcare competencies—such as limiting mother-child transmission of Hepatitis B, HIV, Chagas disease, and syphilis—is reflected in a recent agreement with the UN Development Fund to partner with 16 nations in the Caribbean (48). At the same time, the Kyrgyz Republic partnered with India and the UN Population Fund to implement telemedicine services to reduce neonatal and maternal mortality rates (49).

A joint project implemented by India and USAID will address climate-change-induced vulnerabilities in the Indo-Pacific (50). It will promote climate-smart agriculture to ensure food security and strengthen Fiji's emergency care services in disaster situations. The Global Innovation Partnership between the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office and India's Ministry of External Affairs is set to deploy technological innovations from India to Africa, South Asia, and the Indo-Pacific by focusing on climate and health weaknesses in vulnerable populations (51).

The need for triangular cooperation was reignited during the pandemic and served as a reminder that unique global health challenges require sustained multidimensional collaborative approaches. India has successfully demonstrated its prowess in the healthcare sector. However, scaling up triangular cooperation arrangements must tackle the challenge associated with the lack of understanding of the modality's impact and the need to elucidate what constitutes triangular cooperation. The formulation and implementation of mechanisms that facilitate the systematic monitoring

and evaluation of projects will usher in substantial projects steered by India and will contribute to the development of the health sector in developing economies.

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## Endnotes

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