

**The Institute
for Regional
Security**

Shared Interests, Practical Cooperation: Australia–Japan Engagement in East Africa

Research Directions

1. Introduction

As strategic and economic dynamics extend beyond traditional regions, Japan and Australia are reassessing how practical cooperation can be applied across a widening Indo-Pacific strategic frame, including areas increasingly connected to Indian Ocean trade, digital and security systems. Both countries are long-standing partners with increasingly overlapping strategic and economic interests across this broader Indo-Pacific region.¹ Once considered peripheral to Indo-Pacific planning, East Africa now occupies a growing place in regional diplomacy and strategic conversations. The ports, sea lanes, undersea digital infrastructure, mineral corridors and demographic dynamism of East Africa make it a critical node connecting the Indian Ocean to global markets. As maritime trading nations dependent on open sea lanes, diversified supply chains and stable regional partners, Australia and Japan both have strong incentives to think more deliberately about East Africa's future. This reassessment also reflects Australia's increasingly explicit focus on trade diversification and supply-chain de-risking in recent policy debates and initiatives, a concern that closely parallels Japanese efforts to reduce exposure to concentrated markets and suppliers including initiatives such as the Australia–National Manufacturing Initiative (ANMI).²

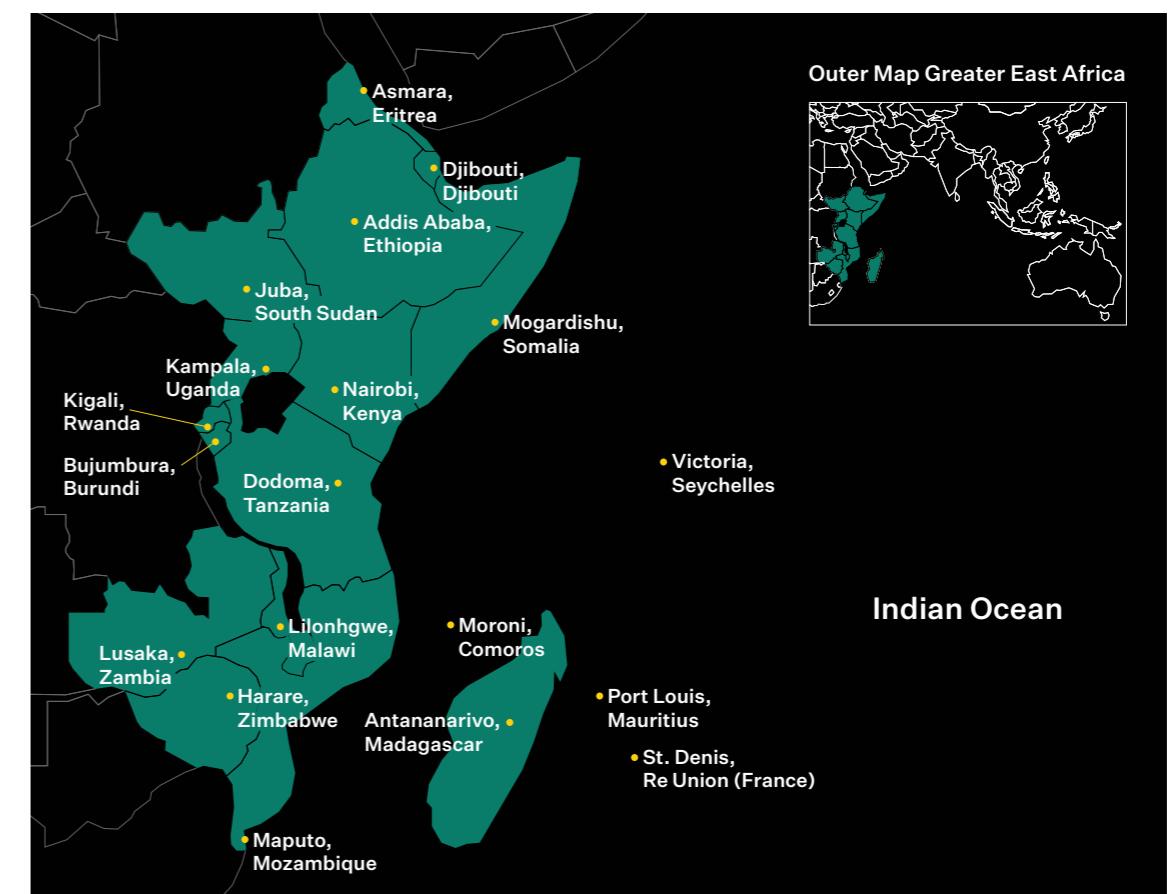
Japan's engagement with Africa has evolved substantially through the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD).³ Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently confirmed that Tokyo had fulfilled the US\$30 billion public – private investment pledge made at TICAD 8, underscoring continuity and reliability in Japanese engagement.⁴ Japan places increasing emphasis on industrial cooperation, quality infrastructure and shared technology as pillars of its long-term Africa strategy.⁵ Tokyo's focus on transparency, co-creation and long-term industrial development resonates with African partners seeking sustainable economic transformation.

Historically less active in Africa, Australia increasingly recognises a wider Indo-Pacific defined not by rigid geographic lines but by functional connectivity. The 2023 Defence Strategic Review highlighted the importance of Indian Ocean security, resilient maritime routes and diversified economic partnerships.⁶ The 2023 International Development Policy emphasised governance, climate resilience, digital systems and sustainable growth areas directly relevant to East Africa's aspirations.⁷ As global competition intensifies around critical minerals, digital sovereignty and maritime security, Australia's interests increasingly align with Japan's in seeking stable, transparent and resilient partners across the Indian Ocean.

This paper outlines a practical framework for Australia–Japan cooperation in East Africa, grounded in complementarity, sustainability and mutual benefit. It draws on Japan's financial and technological capabilities, Australia's governance and geospatial expertise and East Africa's strategic ambitions. It also recognises the active presence of India and China. The Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and membership in the Quad position India as an essential maritime partner while the infrastructure and digital footprint associated with the implementation of China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI) shape regional realities. Rather than replicating or resisting external engagement, Japan and Australia can provide alternative pathways that prioritise investment and development quality, transparency and local agency.⁸

The aim is not to launch expensive or duplicative initiatives; but to identify realistic, high-impact opportunities where joint engagement can produce durable benefits for East African partners while strengthening Australia's and Japan's strategic interests.

Figure 1: Map of East Africa



2. Strategic Convergence

Peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific are threatened by hostile action by claimants involved in border and territorial disputes.

2.1 East Africa as a Strategic Link in the Indo-Pacific

East Africa's infrastructure and geography make it central to the functioning of global digital and maritime systems. The Eastern Africa Submarine Cable System (EASSy), a 10,000-kilometre fibre-optic cable linking Sudan to South Africa, constitutes one of the most important digital arteries on the continent.⁹ Continual disruptions to different submarine cables including EASSy, Seacom and The East African Marine System (TEAMS) have exposed vulnerabilities with continent-wide effects on commerce, government services and financial systems. A detailed assessment by the Carnegie Endowment warns that Africa's undersea infrastructure requires urgent resilience planning, redundancy and governance upgrades.¹⁰

Maritime infrastructure informs a similar story. Port expansions in Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, Lamu and Djibouti place East Africa on the front line of global logistics.¹¹ These ports support energy shipments, manufactured goods, humanitarian aid, fisheries and digital cables linking three continents. Japan and Australia have both long anchored their foreign-policy thinking in maritime stability resulting in a strong interest in East African coastal resilience.

2.2 Convergence within the Quad and the Indo-Pacific Framework

Australia and Japan's strategic alignment is reinforced through the Quad in which both states cooperate alongside India and the United States on supply-chain diversification, digital standards, maritime security and emerging technologies. The 2024 Quad Leaders' Statement reaffirmed the bloc's commitment to secure maritime routes, resilient critical-mineral supply chains, climate adaptation and trusted digital infrastructure, all relevant to East Africa's development trajectory.¹²

India's growing engagement under the SAGAR doctrine and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative adds further synergy. India conducts regular naval and coast-guard cooperation with Kenya, Mauritius, Seychelles and other African littoral states, making trilateral cooperation with Australia and Japan both feasible and strategically coherent. Shared training, maritime domain awareness and fisheries governance are all areas where India's experience enhances Australia–Japan efforts.

2.3 A Pragmatic Approach to China's Presence

China is an entrenched actor in East Africa. Research from the Center for Strategic and International Studies documents more than 40 Chinese built or financed port or port-adjacent projects across Africa, many concentrated on the East African coast.¹³ Chinese digital firms such as Huawei and ZTE maintain substantial roles in national backbones, cloud services and surveillance systems across the region.¹⁴

A pragmatic Japan–Australia strategy need not oppose China's presence; but explore ways to complement and balance it. Areas such as port safety, climate adaptation, digital governance, environmental protection and anti-illegal fishing enforcement offer opportunities for constructive, non-zero-sum cooperation when African governments support it. East African states generally prefer diversified partnerships over exclusive alignments, making a pluralistic approach both diplomatically sound and regionally welcome.

3. Complementary Capabilities

Australia and Japan bring distinct strengths that, when combined, create a partnership model capable of delivering high-quality, durable and locally relevant outcomes.

Japan's comparative advantages lie in its long-term development financing, high-quality infrastructure, industrial technology and technical training. Japan has decades of experience working in East Africa on the construction of resilient infrastructure, supporting industrial upgrading and promoting quality standards through Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) and Nippon Export and Investment Insurance (NEXI).¹⁵ Japan's increasing focus on co-creation and industrial collaboration with African partners and commitment to Quality Infrastructure Investment position it to provide support on transparent, resilient and climate-aligned infrastructure.¹⁶

Australia's expertise comprising governance reform, institutional capacity building, geospatial systems, environmental regulation, dry land agriculture, mineral governance and the adaptation of advanced technologies to low-resource contexts is highly complementary. Australian public institutions have long experience ensuring that digital and physical infrastructure align with absorptive capacity. This makes Australia well-suited to help adapt Japanese industrial, digital and maritime systems for African environments.

Japan can provide "hardware" including infrastructure, technology and finance while Australia provides "software" comprising governance, regulation, maintenance planning and institutional strengthening. East African governments have repeatedly emphasised that this integrated approach is the missing piece needed to make major infrastructure sustainable over time.¹⁷

4. Areas for Practical Cooperation

4.1 Minerals and Value Addition

East Africa holds significant reserves of graphite, niobium, titanium and emerging rare-earth prospects.¹⁸ Japan's supply-chain diversification agenda, shaped by its search for alternatives to concentrated mineral markets, has increasingly pointed toward Africa. METI's resource-security strategy identifies African mineral partnerships as essential to Japan's long-term industrial stability.¹⁹ Deeper engagement with East Africa aligns with Canberra's broader policy shift trade diversification and supply-chain de-risking, reinforcing the convergence between Australian and Japanese approaches to critical minerals and industrial resilience.

Australia's strengths in transparent mining governance, environment, social and governance (ESG) practices, geological mapping, concession design and community engagement provide the ideal complement.²⁰ This cooperation can support East African governments in licensing frameworks, environmental oversight, local beneficiation and early-stage processing. The U.S.-supported Lobito Corridor that aims to link mineral-rich regions to Atlantic ports, highlights growing international interest in sustainable African mineral corridors.²¹ Joint Australian – Japanese engagement would enhance governance and environmental standards while providing reliable inputs for Japan's industrial base.

4.2 Maritime Security, Port Resilience and the Blue Economy

Japan has a long track record of supporting fisheries, maritime engineering and port development across Africa. Australia's maritime governance, fisheries science and surveillance expertise complements this. Together, the two countries can strengthen port resilience, search-and-rescue capacity, maritime domain awareness, environmental protection and climate-adapted coastal infrastructure. India's role as a maritime capacity-building partner adds a natural trilateral dimension. Constructive engagement with China in technical areas such as port safety and environmental standards may also be feasible when aligned with African priorities.

4.3 Digital Public Infrastructure and Geospatial Systems

Digital infrastructure is essential to East Africa's growth. Undersea cable networks such as EASSy are critical, yet vulnerable. The Carnegie Endowment has highlighted how outages disrupt economies across Africa and beyond.²²

Japan's digital engineering capacity and Australia's geospatial governance experience offer an effective partnership model. Together, they can support national mapping, land information systems, mineral traceability, early-warning climate systems and logistics digitisation. Quad cooperation on digital standards and India's leadership in digital public infrastructure further strengthen this alignment.²³

4.4 Agriculture and Food Systems

Agriculture remains the primary livelihood across East Africa. Japan's mechanisation, cold-chain technology and industrial agriculture investments, paired with Australia's dry-land agronomy, water management and supply-chain governance can help address climate pressures, increase productivity and reduce post-harvest losses. Joint research, climate-smart farming partnerships and agro-processing zones would deliver direct impacts on livelihoods.

4.5 Infrastructure Governance and Corridor Management

Long-term infrastructure performance depends on governance.²⁴ Japan's Quality Infrastructure Investments (QII) are most effective when paired with strong regulatory systems, maintenance planning, land governance and environmental oversight. Australia excels in all these areas.²⁵ Joint efforts could lower trade costs, improve border processes, strengthen land and environmental regulation and ensure infrastructure sustainability.

5. Implementation Pathways

A practical Japan-Australia engagement model would make use of existing platforms rather than create new architectures. TICAD remains Japan's principal Africa engagement mechanism. The next iterations of this group offer opportunities for structured Australia-Japan collaboration. Quad working groups already provide alignment on minerals, maritime security and digital systems.²⁶ Regional organisations such as the East African Community (EAC) offer locally grounded platforms for multi-year cooperation, including opportunities for more coordinated Australian and Japanese diplomatic engagement in policy dialogue, regulatory harmonisation and regional integration efforts.²⁷ This diplomatic coordination can extend to engagement through African development institutions and multilateral development banks such as the East African Development Bank (EADB), African Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank allowing diplomatic, technical and financing efforts to reinforce one another.²⁸

Joint technical missions combining Japanese engineers with Australian governance and geospatial specialists could support mineral governance, port resilience, fisheries management or digital system integration. Co-financed and co-branded projects would maintain visibility while ensuring coherent implementation.

Technology adaptation could be a central pillar. Australia's experience with remote and resource-constrained environments provides practical insights for scaling Japanese technology in African contexts.²⁹ Embedding maintenance pathways, training and local supply chains into design reduces risks of technological misalignment.

Cooperation with India, especially in maritime and digital sectors, and selective technical coordination with China where African governments provide support can further enhance outcomes.

6. Risks and Constraints

While East Africa presents clear opportunities for Australia–Japan cooperation, it does so within a wider strategic landscape in which both countries are already deeply engaged in Southeast Asia and India. In relative terms, these regions may appear more immediately compelling due to market size, proximity and institutional familiarity. However, this comparison risks overlooking the distinct advantages that East Africa offers as a complementary, rather than competing, theatre of engagement.

East Africa combines a number of structural features that differentiate it from other Indo-Pacific partners. These include widespread use of English in government and commerce, legal and administrative systems shaped in part by common law traditions and long-standing Commonwealth ties that lower transaction costs for Australian and to some extent Japanese engagement. The region also sits at the intersection of Indian Ocean maritime routes linking Asia, the Middle East and Africa; positioning it as a gateway rather than an endpoint within wider supply-chain and connectivity networks. These factors do not make East Africa a substitute for engagement in Southeast Asia or India, but they do make it a comparatively accessible environment for targeted, high-impact cooperation at modest scale.

Budget constraints in both countries limit the scale of future engagement, necessitating a focus on targeted, high-impact initiatives. Absorptive capacity limitations in East African institutions require sustained, patient collaboration. Complex coordination across multiple ministries, agencies and private actors introduces administrative risks. Perceptions of great-power competition could undermine legitimacy if cooperation is not framed transparently. Finally, political transitions, commodity-market volatility and external shocks can alter timelines and incentives. These risks underscore the need for flexible frameworks, realistic expectations and long-term commitment.

These risks suggest East Africa should be approached not as a short-term alternative to established Asian partnerships, but as part of a longer-term structural shift in which Africa's demographic growth, resource endowments and connectivity are gradually increasing its strategic weight alongside Asia, rather than in competition with it.

7. Conclusion

East Africa has become an integral part of an expanded Indo-Pacific defined by digital connectivity, maritime trade, climate resilience and critical mineral supply. Cooperation in East Africa offers Australia and Japan a way to advance shared interests while supporting African priorities for stability, industrialisation and sustainable development.

Persistent security risks, including terrorism and violent extremism present a material challenge to East Africa's long-term stability and economic integration if left unaddressed. Recent multilateral initiatives underscore growing recognition that insecurity in parts of East Africa including the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes region and northern Mozambique can undermine regional connectivity, development gains and investor confidence. In this context, Australia and Japan bring complementary capabilities that could support African and multilateral stabilisation efforts: Australia through counter-terrorism cooperation, specialist training and capacity building, and Japan through long-standing experience in peacekeeping, civilian protection and post-conflict stabilisation. Carefully coordinated, such engagement could reinforce broader development and governance objectives without shifting the emphasis away from African-led solutions.

Combining Japan's strengths in quality infrastructure, finance and industrial technology with Australia's expertise in governance, geospatial systems and absorptive innovation provides both countries with the opportunity to establish credible, coherent and sustainable development pathways across the region. Complementary engagement with India and constructive technical coordination with China, where appropriate, would substantially enhance this framework.

The proposed approach aligns with East African aspirations for diversified partnerships, high-quality investment and institutionally grounded growth. Australia and Japan can help shape a more resilient, connected and prosperous Indian Ocean community through delivery of practical cooperation anchored in shared interests.

Endnotes

1 The term “Indo-Pacific” is used here as a strategic and analytical concept rather than a fixed geographic designation. While the physical geography of the Indian and Pacific Oceans remains unchanged; Australian, Japanese and Indian policy frameworks increasingly apply the Indo-Pacific lens to regions functionally connected through maritime trade routes, digital infrastructure, supply chains and security dynamics. From this perspective, East Africa is linked to Asia via the Indian Ocean and, in some analyses, parts of the west coast of South America following significant Chinese port investments (including in Peru), fall within an expanded strategic interpretation of the Indo-Pacific rather than its traditional geographic boundaries.

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