Foreign aid, foreign competition, and the derailment of democracy

The cold war foreign aid policies of France, the United States, and that of francophone Africa were driven principally by three different sets of interests. The cultural interests of the French were the cornerstone of an extensive aid program designed to promote la francophonie, a francophone-speaking community. This desire prompted biannual francophone summits seeking French presidents opposite their African counterparts and policies dictating that most French aid to Africa during the 1980s, the last cold war decade, would go to francophone Africa. Cold war ideological interests and a desire to thwart the spread of communism fueled the United States's aggressive African aid program. Whereas ostensibly anticommunist African regimes were rewarded with nearly 80 percent of all United States aid to Africa during the 1980s, self-claimed communist regimes were at best neglected or at worst destabilized. Meanwhile, Japan adopted a neomercantilist strategy of funneling foreign aid to African countries seen as economically valuable in terms of trade. As a result, the lion's share of Japanese aid during the 1980s went to countries that were rich sources of raw materials vital to Japanese industry (e.g., Niger and uranium), future sources of such raw materials (e.g., Gabon and oil), or promising markets capable of absorbing Japanese exports (e.g., Côte d'Ivoire). As long as the foreign aid policies of these three nations were driven by different interests, francophone Africa remained the chief beneficiary of a stable "complementary foreign aid regime" during the cold war, and relations between the donors tended to be balanced, cooperative, and predictable. It could even be said that Washington and to a lesser extent Tokyo promoted the idea of France's special role in francophone Africa, commonly referred to as France's chasse gardée—literally, an "exclusive hunting ground."

However, while the complementary foreign aid regime could keep foreign competition in Africa, the system effectively ensured that conflict would remain at acceptable levels and almost imperceptible to the public. According to Foccart Paré—the recently published memoirs of Jacques Foccart, architect of French-African relations under the De Gaulle and Pompidou administrations—the French equated the potential American threat to francophone Africa with that posed by the Soviet Union and in the extreme belittled the United States as the primary long-term threat to French interests. Foccart even went so far as to deceive Mobutu Sese Seko's close ties to Washington as breaching "Anglo-Saxon influence" in Zaire, the largest country of francophone Africa, and therefore hastening a clear "victory" for the United States at the expense of French interests. Despite Foccart's characterization, however, the complementary foreign aid regime worked to guarantee that Zaire would remain the exception and not the rule in United States-African relations in francophone Africa during the cold war era. Since the demise of the cold war in the early 1990s, however, the complementary foreign aid system began to give way. Now, French, American, and Japanese foreign aid policies are increasingly transparently based on a common goal: economic self-interest.

The devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994 for the first time since the creation of the Franc Zone in 1944 conspicuously signaled that French economic interests would no longer automatically take a backseat to the cultural imperative to promote la francophonie. The dwindling importance of ideologically based American foreign aid policies and the rising significance of economic interests became apparent in 1992. That year Washington refused a series of highly publicized speeches rejecting its past support for France's privileged role in francophone Africa and favoring a more aggressive promotion of U.S. trade and investment in the region. "The African market is open to everyone," explained former assistant secretary of state for African affairs Herman Cohen in a speech in Libreville, Gabon, urging the now seemingly anachronistic concept of a chasse gardée. "We must accept free and fair competition, equality between all actors." Interestingly, for Japan the end of the cold war marked the end of an existing aid policy that stressed the importance of pursuing economic interests. In this way Japan, predisposed to view francophone Africa as an asset to be exploited, was poised to exploit the post-cold war revisions to the global economy and optimize their for-profit capacities in the region. These ongoing post-cold war changes are, for better or for worse, encouraging French, American, and Japanese competition—most notably in the highly lucrative telecommunications and petroleum industries—in francophone Africa. The emergence of what can be referred to as "triangular competition" is captured by two foreign aid trends. First, France has sought to bolster its privileged position by massively increasing its aid to francophone Africa from $3.77 billion in 1980-82 to $8.48 billion in 1992-94. Second, as American aid tumbled from a peak of $1.45 billion in 1986-88 to $1.23 billion in 1992-94, Japanese aid policies changed—from $204 million in 1980-82 to $1.34 billion in 1992-94—making Japan, whose share of the foreign aid pie grew from 7 percent in 1980-82 to 31 percent in 1992-94, the second largest aid donor in francophone Africa. Second, seemingly contradictory French, American, and Japanese responses to the democratization process in francophone Africa can be understood—only by observing the evolution of this triangular competition. France's official stance on democratization is often made hollow by the consequences of its ongoing aid relationships in the region that keep pro-French elites in power. For example, French aid to the Biya regime in Cameroon grew from $159 million in 1990 to $343 million in the presidential election year of 1992. France increased its contributions to ensure Biya's reelection victory, as Biya's successor was likely to have been John Fru Ndi, an anglophone politician whom Paris viewed as a threat to French economic and cultural interests in Cameroon.

In sharp contrast, the United States and to a lesser degree Japan have been more vocal than their French counterparts in supporting the democratization process in francophone Africa. According to a diplomat based at the American embassy in Abidjan, local American and Japanese diplomats "often have little to lose and everything to gain" by denouncing francophone administrations that impede the transition to a new political order. In other words, promoting democracy is a low-cost strategy with potentially high returns—namely, the replacement of pro-French elites with new protagonists more sensitive to American and Japanese interests. For that reason, argues French critic of United States aid policies, local American diplomats vehemently denounced Biya's manipulation of the 1992 Cameroonian elections and temporarily suspended aid. These critics further claim that Washington and Tokyo are less interested in promoting democracy in francophone Africa than in advancing their own goals. Indeed, claims that American and Japanese makers have been more supportive of African democratization than have their French counterparts are suspicious; ample evidence suggests inherent contradictions between Washington's pro-democracy rhetoric and its actions in francophone Africa both during and after the cold war.

One result of the three-way competition for economic gain and prestige in francophone Africa is that French policy makers tend to emerge as the protectors of the status quo. That may result from French perceptions of the democratization process as a zero-sum game (i.e., one actor's gain is another's loss) that is eroding France's historically high level of influence in the area. From that perspective both the Americans and Japanese stress the need to lose and everything to gain by advocating multiparty democracies in France's one-time chasse gardée. Predictably, tensions between the United States and France and, to a lesser degree, between France and Japan have risen.

Too easily overlooked is the potential of trade deficits of dollars from American, French, and Japanese sources provided, in theory, to promote democratization in francophone Africa. Although no amount of foreign aid can permanently prevent local actors from assuming ultimate control of their own destinies, recent experience demonstrates that such funds are helping to maintain the status quo, induce changes at odds with the desires of local forces, and derail the democratization process.

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The Africa Seminar

History E-87, The Africa Seminar, a weekly interdisciplinary forum for graduate students to discuss works in progress and research-related issues and interests, will meet on Tuesdays, from 5:30 to 7 p.m., beginning April 8.

Herskovits Library

The Cooperative Collection Management Coordinating Committee (CCMCC) of the Illinois Board of Higher Education has granted $1,000 to the Herskovits Library to enhance its collections of Southern African literature in English. Every year CCMCC funds various projects designed to strengthen the resources of libraries in Illinois.

Departmental staff are regularly adding reference papers to AFRIC, the Africaniana Conference Paper Index. Currently, AFRIC users have access to approximately 70,000 individual conference papers, searchable on-line by author, title, or keyword. AFRIC can be reached from any electronic catalog workstation in the Herskovits Library, from the Herskovits Library's Web page <http://www.library.nwu.edu/african>, or by using a telnet utility to connect to the library's Internet address <LIBRARY. UCC.NIU.EDU>. Process 129.165.54.2. AFRIC catalogers gladly accept submissions of African-related conference proceedings and news of African-related conferences in the United States and abroad.

The CD-ROMs and on-line files available in room 5616 of the Herskovits Library now include LIMAG, an up-to-date electronic resource produced by the Centre d'Etudes Littéraires Francophones et Comparties and Université Paris-Nord that provides access to works concerning literature of the Maghreb. Access to LIMAG is limited to hours when library staff are present, weekdays, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m.

Recently released statistics documenting use of the Herskovits Library indicate that last year hundreds of visiting scholars from 22 regional institutions and an additional 39 institutions worldwide conducted research at Africans. The researchers came from 26 countries and 21 U.S. states. In 1996 a total of 32,253 monographs were lent from the Herskovits Library, including 3,888 in response to interlibrary loan requests. Over the last seven years, over a series of circulation increased 81 percent, while lending through interlibrary loan increased by 420 percent.