Japan’s Pursuit of Superpower Status in Africa

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As of 1994 Japan has emerged as one of the most influential powers on the African continent. A deliberate policy of enlisting African nations in making Japan an economic and political superpower has ensured a level of influence for Japanese policy makers paralleled only by their French, American and German counterparts. Once criticized for adopting a neo-mercantilist approach that seemingly relegated Africans to providing natural resources to fuel Japan’s industrial growth, Japanese foreign policy as of 1994 is increasingly perceived by Africans as contributing to the socioeconomic and political development of the African continent. The Japanese foreign policy establishment, most notably the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has been especially adroit in fostering a greater focus on the political dimension of Japan’s relationships with the African continent, as well as judiciously using a generous foreign aid budget to cultivate diplomatic ties. Japanese foreign policy also has benefited from the unique relationship between the Japanese government and big business. In short, the answer to an often-posed question during the latter half of the 1980s—"Is there a rising sun over Africa?"—is a definite ‘yes’ at the end of 1994. The Japanese foreign policy establishment is firmly committed to the extension of Japanese influence throughout the globe, including in Africa.

NEO-MERCANTILISM AND THE PURSUIT OF ECONOMIC SELF-INTEREST

Japan traditionally has pursued a neo-mercantilist foreign policy towards Africa that underscores the overriding importance of securing economic self-interest (kokueki) relative to other foreign policy goals, including the promotion of socioeconomic development and democratization in the target country. A rising economic superpower with the world’s second largest gross national product (GNP), Japan also earned the distinction of being the first Great Power of the post-World War II era to reconstitute national security in largely economic terms. The hallmark of Japanese neo-mercantilism has been the vigorous use of an increasingly generous foreign aid budget to penetrate foreign economic markets—what Stirling has referred to as a business foreign policy.

Ironically, Japan was physically and economically ravaged after World War II and was a net recipient of foreign aid during the 1940s and 1950s. Prohibited from rebuilding a sizeable military under its postwar Constitution, Japanese leaders concentrated on internal economic reconstruction and development. After regaining full sovereignty in 1952, Japan embarked on a modest foreign aid programme that took the form of delayed reparation payments to such regional neighbours as Burma, the Philippines and Indonesia. By 1989, the same year that the Berlin Wall’s collapse symbolically heralded the end of the Cold War, the Japanese foreign aid budget had surpassed that of the other industrialized democracies. In the case of Africa, Tokyo’s foreign aid programme is second only to that of France, fueling more than $6.9bn in Japanese exports to African markets and $4.0bn in Japanese imports of African goods in 1994. From the vantage point of many African policy makers, Japan has emerged as an economic superpower on the African continent.

The top recipients of Japanese foreign aid clearly demonstrate the neo-mercantil-
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ist linkage between aid and trade. Most of these countries can be divided into two categories: 1) important present or future sources of raw materials vital to Japanese industry, such as strategic minerals from South Africa, phosphates from Morocco and copper from Zambia; or 2) key regional economic actors capable of absorbing Japanese exports and serving as a hub for further regional economic expansion, such as South Africa in southern Africa, Kenya in East Africa, Egypt in Northeast Africa and Ghana in West Africa. In both cases, the primary purpose of foreign aid is to promote or strengthen Japanese economic interests.

The willingness of Japanese policy makers to downplay the political make-up of recipient regimes in favour of their geo-economic worth served as an important component of Japanese neo-mercantilist practices. Especially during the Cold War, Japanese policy makers were opposed to the ideological litmus tests demanded by their American counterparts and the cultural imperatives (e.g., promotion of the French language) imposed by the French Ministry of Cooperation, preferring instead to secure markets for both imports and exports regardless of the ideology of the regime in question. During the last Cold War decade of the 1980s, for example, Japan provided more than 21% of its African foreign aid to socialist African countries. One of the most noted examples of this policy was the extensive foreign aid relationship that was cultivated with the Tanzanian regime of Julius Nyerere, the so-called 'dean' of African socialism, and which continues under the current leadership of President Benjamin Mkapa. Japanese leaders were attracted by Nyerere's role as an influential leader in southern Africa, arguably the most lucrative regional market in Africa, specifically hoping that this relationship would soften international criticism of Japan's close ties with the white minority-ruled regimes of southern Africa.

The apolitical pursuit of economic self-interest was perhaps best demonstrated by Japanese foreign policy towards the apartheid regime of South Africa. At the same time that numerous Western governments were enacting anti-apartheid legislation that severely restricted economic links with South Africa, Japanese policy makers actively sought to enhance Japan's regional economic standing by taking over those market shares that were being abandoned by their Western counterparts. In 1987, one year after the US Congress adopted stringent trade and investment restrictions known as the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act, the Toyota Corporation not only tripled its South African revenues, but joined with other Japanese automobile manufacturers (Mitsubishi and Nissan) to control 85% of the South African automobile market. According to opponents of the US anti-apartheid legislation, Japanese companies in 1987 reaped tremendous revenues in a variety of markets, such as mainframe computers, automated office equipment and photocopying, once dominated by American companies.

The importance of South Africa and its neighbours in current Japanese foreign economic policy cannot be underestimated. In 1994 South Africa was Japan's largest trading partner in Africa, importing $2.2bn in Japanese goods (32.4% of all Japanese exports to Africa) and exporting $1.2bn in goods to Japan (30.6% of all Japanese imports from Africa). An important outcome of this trend was the emergence of southern Africa as Japan's most important regional market on the African continent, accounting for $2.0bn (23.5%) of all Japanese exports to Africa and $2.2bn (32%) of all African exports to Japan. It is precisely for this reason that President Nelson Mandela visited Japan soon after being released from prison in 1990, with an official Head of State visit planned for 1995.

The first half of the 1990s also witnessed greater Japanese economic penetration of almost all African markets regardless of colonial heritage. This development is significant in that Japanese foreign economic policy historically was concentrated in the former British colonies, as witnessed by the fact that these countries received
approximately 70% of all Japanese foreign aid towards Africa during the 1980s. Although many reasons for this trend have been offered, most notably the greater facility of doing business in the English-speaking former British colonies, Japanese businesspersons usually note that the francophone economies were more difficult to penetrate due to powerful French monopolies and a conscious French policy to back them up. These French monopolies have been significantly weakened by a variety of trends associated with the end of the Cold War, most notably the emergence of new African elites less willing to accept the privileged pro-French ties enjoyed by their predecessors, permitting the Japanese Government and private businesses to make significant inroads during the second half of the 1990s. A simple yet telling indicator of Japan’s growing interest is that Japanese foreign aid to francophone Africa more than quadrupled from an average of $101m during 1980–82 to an average of $460m during 1990–92.

Not surprisingly, the two most economically advanced and regionally influential francophone countries in West Africa—Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire—especially have benefited from Japan’s vigorous pursuit of trade and investment in francophone Africa. Both countries represent strategic economic points of entry for Japanese manufactured products, most notably automobiles, that subsequently can be sold in neighbouring countries, as well as important sources of high-valued Japanese imports, such as fish products. The emerging Japanese economic presence in francophone Africa is perhaps best symbolized by the construction of a massive Japanese Embassy overlooking the ocean in Dakar, Senegal, the first French colony and former capital of French West Africa.

A close partnership between government and big business (kanzai itaihugi) in the pursuit of business diplomacy (minkan keizai gaikō) has served as an essential ingredient of Japan’s economic success in Africa. All Japanese Government agencies, most notably the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), operate from the assumption that big business and diplomacy are both complementary and mutually reinforcing. They, therefore, highlight the importance of working closely with the Japanese business community (zaikai) to promote Japanese trade and investment in Africa. Even in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Japanese bureaucracy most inclined to argue the political ramifications of a given policy, career diplomats accept and promote the economic imperatives of international diplomacy.

The close partnership between government and big business is further facilitated by a wide variety of ancillary groups and organizations. The Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) maintains offices in the capitals of several strategically located countries—Algeria, Côte d’Ivoire, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania and Zimbabwe—that for the most part represent the most important economies on the African continent. The Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) programme presently sends abroad more than 1,000 ‘freshman’ Japanese volunteers on an annual basis, with approximately 25–30% being slated for African positions. In part inspired by the American Peace Corps model, the JOCV program has sent more than 5,000 volunteers to Africa since 1965. Japanese policy makers and corporate leaders also have formed numerous private committees, such as the Africa Society of Japan and the Keidanren Committee on sub-Saharan Africa, that guide official government policy. The Keidanren Committee has been especially effective in that it includes the leadership of dozens of the most influential Japanese corporations.

**ASSERTING LEADERSHIP IN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT**

The growing desire of Japanese policy makers to translate their country’s extraordinary economic power into political influence and leadership on a global scale had
significant implications for Japanese foreign policy towards Africa at the beginning of the 1990s. A crucial turning point emerged in October 1993 with the launching of the first Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD I). The holding of what in essence constituted an international summit on development in Africa signalled a significant softening of Japanese neo-mercantilism, as well as the willingness of Japanese policy makers to take the lead in a foreign policy realm historically dominated by the US and former European colonial powers. Enthusiasm for Japan’s development initiative already has prompted preparations for a Second Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD II) scheduled to be held sometime during 1998. The TICAD I conference was attended by 1,000 delegates from 63 African, Asian and donor countries, as well as dozens of regional and international organizations. For the first time during the post-World War II era, Japan’s rising economic power is being translated into leadership for the sociodevelopment of the African continent.

Taking advantage of its unique role as a non-white nation with close ties to the developing South, Tokyo has embraced the imperative of South-South cooperation as an alternative to traditional North-South conceptualizations. This unique focus on South-South development cooperation is being carried out in close cooperation with inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, such as the UN and the Global Coalition for Africa (two of the sponsors of the TICAD I initiative). A special focus on Asian-African cooperation that draws upon Japan’s Asian heritage serves as a second component of Tokyo’s blueprint for African development. According to Japanese policy makers, both Asia and Africa have suffered the same colonial past and have confronted the same challenges of socioeconomic development. Both regions, therefore, should attempt to learn from each other’s experiences, with the implicit assumption that Africa should attempt to learn from Asia’s success in promoting socioeconomic development. Towards this end, Japanese policy makers are planning a series of Asia-African forums. Interestingly enough, the first forum was held in December 1994 in Bandung, Indonesia, with the specific intention of building on the historic regional pride associated with the holding of the original Bandung conference in 1955 as part of the Non-Aligned Movement.

One of the most important conclusions of the Asia-Africa Forums and the TICAD initiative in general is that lessons can be drawn from Asian (read Japanese) models of development. Although careful to note that no one model can be blindly applied regardless of the culture and history of the country seeking foreign assistance, Japanese policy makers nonetheless argue that numerous components of the Asian model can and should be adapted to African settings if their leaders truly seek to promote self-sustaining development. As increasingly highlighted by African policy makers, especially those from francophone Africa, one of the virtues of this model from an African perspective is its dual emphasis on the important role of strong states in promoting rapid economic development at the same time that the host country preserves its own identity. The implications of especially the latter portion of this statement is that Africa can and perhaps should develop in association with foreign partners less concerned with imposing their ideological or cultural biases, such as Washington’s demands for African support of anti-communist initiatives during the Cold War era or France’s demands for adherence to la francophonie (the greater community of French-speaking countries).

Critics have correctly noted, however, that Asian models of development are not necessarily favourable to the promotion of democracy and, in fact, can be interpreted by African leaders uninterested in democracy as a justification for maintaining authoritarian systems of governance. In the case of South Korea, for example, often heralded as one of the success stories of the newly industrializing countries (NICs) of
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East Asia, South Korean military leaders in the aftermath of a 1961 military coup d’état did exactly the opposite of what the northern donor countries are demanding of African leaders today. They consolidated political power, curtailed political pluralism and participation, and institutionalized centralized decision-making procedures by technocrats almost completely free from societal pressures or input (i.e., the influence of civil society). Others also have questioned whether the success of what in essence constitutes an authoritarian model of development is perhaps due to the existence of greater levels of ethnic homogeneity or other unique cultural attributes within the Asian NICs that simply cannot be reproduced in Africa’s multiethnic and multicultural environment. Simply put, should one focus on Asian culture and homogeneity or enlightened Asian authoritarianism as the basis for applying the Asian model to Africa?

The TICAD blueprint for development also encourages regional integration as an important vehicle for African development. Japanese policy makers in particular have focused on the prospects for success of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the role of South Africa as an engine for economic growth that will potentially reinvigorate the entire region. This interest is demonstrated by the sharp increase in Japanese foreign aid towards southern Africa in the aftermath of South Africa’s transition to a multiparty, multiracial democracy in 1994 and is clearly driven by the expectation of achieving higher levels of trade and investment with the region. Towards this end, Japan has sponsored several conferences in the region, including the forthcoming Regional Workshop for Eastern and Southern Africa to be held in July 1995 in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Japan is particularly active in efforts to amend the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) that maintains a ban on the international trade in ivory. Acting in concert with Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe—three nations with significant ivory stocks due to the necessity of culling flourishing elephant herds—Japan has sought an exception to buy legally tons of excess ivory stocks currently held by these and other African countries. Japan historically has used ivory for a wide variety of purposes, most notably the manufacture of highly intricate signature seals for letters and documents. Opponents of the change have successfully claimed that any lifting of the ban would lead to the further decimation of elephant herds in neighboring countries due to the presumption that poached ivory could be easily intermixed with legally sold stocks. Interestingly enough, the debate is often framed by African policy makers as a quest against the ‘paternalistic’ and ‘ill-founded’ environmental concerns of the West, with Japan adroitly positioning itself as a defender of the developing South.

EMERGENCE OF GEOPOLITICAL ASPIRATIONS

The most recent shift in Japanese foreign policy towards Africa is signalled by planning for a High Level Symposium on Peace and Development Problems of Conflict in Africa to be held in Tokyo in 1995. This conference represents a further softening of Japan’s neo-mercantilist pursuit of economic self-interest and the guarded entry of Japanese policy makers into a foreign policy realm historically dominated by the US and France.

Foreign policy pronouncements of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlight two important aspects of the Japanese approach to African peace and security issues. First, Japan is firmly committed to multilateral initiatives and solutions, particularly under the auspices of the UN Security Council and regional bodies, such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU). According to this vision, international peace and security are best served when countries renounce unilateral (especially military) intervention in favour of the consensual norms and principles of the inter-
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national system. Japanese diplomats are also firmly committed to the non-use of force and, therefore, the peaceful resolution of African conflicts. In order to resolve potential conflicts before they reach a crisis stage, Japanese policy makers emphasize the importance of promoting preventive diplomacy.

Expanding involvement in African peace and security issues perhaps represents part of Japan’s larger geopolitical strategy of gaining a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Japan’s potential entry along with Germany and other countries is under review by the Clinton administration and other members of the UN Security Council, but has yet to move forwards due to ongoing debate as to how many countries from what regions should take their rightful places in an enlarged Security Council. Critics claim that Japan’s involvement in African security issues merely represents a thinly veiled, short-term attempt to ‘buy the favour’ of African leaders whose countries comprise the largest bloc of nations within the UN General Assembly. To be sure, that the 1995 Symposium on Peace and Development is being heralded by Japanese policy makers as coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the UN’s founding clearly suggests a calculated entrance into perhaps the riskiest realm of African politics and society. However, regardless of whether driven by high-minded principles or larger geopolitical calculations (or some combination of the two), Japanese efforts in the realm of conflict resolution have fostered highly favourable impressions on the part of African policy makers. Japan’s quest to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council enjoys overwhelming support among the African membership of the UN General Assembly.

The increasingly vocal support of Japanese policy makers for the promotion and consolidation of democracy in Africa also has signalled a softening of the historically apolitical nature of Japanese neo-mercantilism in Africa. For example, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversaw the termination of bilateral foreign aid programmes (except for emergency and humanitarian aid) in the Sudan (1992), Gambia (1994) and Nigeria (1994). In each of these countries, serious human rights violations and/or the derailment of democratization efforts ensured widespread condemnation within the international community. The Japanese Government also has sought to reward democratic initiatives, most notably by providing funding for elections and sending election observers.

Critics have correctly noted, however, that official Japanese support for democratization has been both hesitant and inconsistently applied. Japan continued to provide significant levels of foreign aid ($129m in 1993 and $198m in 1994) despite the fact that the highly authoritarian regime of President Daniel arap Moi essentially stole the presidential elections of 1992. In addition to serving as an important Japanese export market and regional political leader, Kenya enjoys the distinction of hosting one of the largest overseas communities of Japanese citizens in Africa (second only to that of South Africa). Equally important, the neo-mercantilist imperative has ensured the continuation of trade relationships regardless of what happens on the foreign aid front. Japanese policy makers are usually very hesitant to impose economic sanctions due to the simple reality that such measures ultimately will have a negative impact on Japanese business. As already noted, Japanese business interests play an important role in policy formulation and, therefore, cannot be taken lightly by Japanese policy makers.

JAPAN'S FOREIGN POLICY IN PERSPECTIVE

Japan’s classic neo-mercantilist approach to Africa ensured that both the Japanese Government and big business were well-situated to take advantage of the highly competitive economic environment of the post-Cold War international system. Not simply content to reap the economic benefits of this new era, Japanese policy makers
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instead are seeking to take the lead in the previously neglected areas of African development and political-military security. If current trends continue, one can expect Japan to play an even more important role in political-military security issues during the second half of the 1990s, especially if as expected Japan is granted a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Unlike their counterparts in the other northern industrialized democracies, Japanese policy makers can take heart in the fact that nearly 80% of the Japanese public continues to support the maintenance of already generous official aid programmes in Africa and other regions of the developing South. Indeed, as demonstrated by the evolution of Japanese involvement in Africa from the early 1980s to the present, officials associated with the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government bureaucracies are intent on translating Japan's extraordinary economic power into global influence worthy of a political and economic superpower.

NOTES

8. Unless otherwise noted, all aid figures are from a data set compiled by the author that compares Japanese, French, Swedish and American foreign aid flows towards Africa.