Japan’s Quest for Influence in Africa

PETER J. SCHRAEDER

Japan has emerged as one of the most influential powers on the African continent. Once criticized for adopting an approach that appeared to relegate Africa to providing natural resources to fuel Japan’s industrial growth, Japanese foreign policy is increasingly perceived by Africans as contributing to the continent’s socioeconomic and political development. Despite a seemingly interminable recession, the Japanese foreign policy establishment remains firmly committed to extending Japanese influence throughout the globe, including in Africa.

ECONOMICS BEFORE POLITICS

Japan has traditionally pursued a neomercantilist foreign policy toward Africa, underscoring the overriding importance it attaches to securing economic self-interest relative to other foreign policy goals. The hallmark of Japanese neomercantilism has been the vigorous use of an increasingly generous foreign aid budget to penetrate foreign economic markets.

Tokyo’s foreign aid program to Africa is second only to France’s, and helped promote more than $5.5 billion in Japanese exports to African markets in 1996. Although a falling yen in 1996 reduced the value of aid to Africa that year to $1.1 billion (down from a peak of $1.3 billion in 1995), Japanese aid still exceeded that of the other northern industrialized democracies. From the vantage point of many African policymakers, Japan has emerged as an economic superpower on the African continent.

The roster of top recipients of Japanese foreign aid clearly demonstrates the neomercantilist linkage between aid and trade. Most of these countries can be divided into two categories: important present or future sources of raw materials vital to Japanese industry, such as chromium from South Africa, phosphates from Morocco, and copper from Zambia; and key regional economic actors capable of absorbing Japanese exports and serving as hubs 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.

Japan has been willing to downplay the political makeup of recipient regimes in favor of their geo-economic worth. Especially during the cold war, Japanese policymakers were opposed to the ideological litmus tests demanded by their American counterparts. During the late cold war decade of the 1980s, for example, Japan provided more than 21 percent of its African foreign aid to socialist African countries.

Yet it was Japan’s ties with the apartheid regime of South Africa that best demonstrated its apolitical pursuit of economic self-interest. At the same time that numerous Western governments were enacting anti-apartheid legislation that severely restricted economic links with South Africa, Japanese policymakers 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 United States Congress adopted stringent trade and investment restrictions against South Africa, the Toyota Corporation tripled its South African revenues and joined with other Japanese automobile manufacturers (Mitsubishi and Nissan) to gain control of 85 percent of the country’s automobile market.

In 1996, South Africa was Japan’s largest trading partner in Africa, importing $1.9 billion in Japanese goods (35 percent of all Japanese exports to Africa) and exporting $2.6 billion in goods to Japan (56 percent of all Japanese imports from Africa). Southern Africa as a whole has emerged as Japan’s most

important regional African market, accounting for $2.1 billion (39 percent) of all Japanese exports to Africa and $3.1 billion (65 percent) of all African exports to Japan in 1996. It is precisely for this reason that President Nelson Mandela visited Japan soon after being released from prison in 1990, followed by an official head-of-state visit in July 1995.

The 1990s have witnessed greater Japanese economic penetration of almost all African markets. This is especially true of the francophone region. The francophone economies were once more difficult to penetrate because of powerful French monopolies, but these monopolies have been significantly weakened with the cold war's end, 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 nearly quadrupled from $304 million during the three-year period from 1980 to 1982 to more than $1.3 billion from 1993 to 1995.

**Taking the Lead in Development**

The growing desire of Japanese policymakers to translate their country's extraordinary economic power into political influence and leadership on a global scale had significant implications for Japanese foreign policy toward Africa at the beginning of the 1990s. A crucial turning point occurred in October 1993 with the launching of the first Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD I). That Japan would hold an international summit on development in Africa signaled a significant softening of Japanese neomercantilism; it also showed a willingness on the part of Japanese policymakers to take the lead in a foreign policy realm historically dominated by the United States and the former European colonial powers. Enthusiasm for Japan's development initiative prompted the convening in October 1998 of a Second Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD II). High-level delegations from 51 African, 11 Asian, and 18 North American and European countries attended.

Japan has also taken advantage of its unique role as a nonwhite nation with close ties to the developing South and embraced the imperative of South-South cooperation as an alternative to traditional North-South conceptualizations. A special focus on Asian-African cooperation that draws on Japan's Asian heritage also serves as a component of Tokyo's blueprint for African development. According to Japanese policymakers, both Asia and Africa have suffered the same colonial past and have confronted the same challenges of socioeconomic development. Both regions should therefore attempt to learn from each other's experiences, with the implicit assumption that Africa should attempt to learn from Asia's success in promoting development. Toward this end, Japanese policymakers have coordinated a series of Asia-Africa forums.

One of the most important conclusions of the Asia-Africa forums and the TICAD initiatives 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 to every country seeking foreign assistance, Japanese policymakers nonetheless argue that many components of the Asian model can and should be adapted to African settings if their leaders truly seek to promote self-sustaining development. In a 1995 interview with the Senegalese newspaper Le Soleil, Senegalese Prime Minister Habib Thiam said that one of the virtues of this model from an African perspective is its emphasis on the importance of a strong state in promoting rapid economic development at the same time that the host country "preserves its own identity." According to Thiam, the implication 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.

Critics have correctly noted that Asian models of development are not necessarily favorable to the promotion of democracy, and can be interpreted by African leaders as a justification for maintaining authoritarian systems of governance. Others have also questioned whether the success of what is essentially an authoritarian Asian model of development is perhaps due to greater ethnic homogeneity or other unique cultural attributes in the Asian newly industrializing countries that simply cannot be reproduced in Africa's multietnic 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?

**Emerging Geopolitical Aspirations**

The most recent shift in Japanese policy toward Africa was signaled by the convening in Tokyo of a conference on the impact of conflict on development in Africa in October 1995. This conference represented a further softening of Japan's neomercantilist pursuit of economic self-interest and the
guarded entry of Japanese policymakers into a foreign policy realm historically dominated by the United States and France.

The conference's conclusions and Japanese statements since 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. Second, Japan is firmly committed to the non-use of force and the peaceful resolution of African conflicts. The numerous examples of Japan's initial involvement in the security realm include participation in peacekeeping operations in Mozambique and funding for African peace and security initiatives.

Expanding involvement in African peace and security issues is without doubt part of Japan's larger geopolitical strategy to gain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Critics claim that Japan's involvement in African security issues merely represents a thinly veiled, short-term attempt to "buy the favor" of African leaders, whose countries comprise the largest bloc of nations in the UN General Assembly. Whatever the motivation, Japanese efforts in the realm of conflict resolution have fostered highly favorable impressions on the part of African policymakers, who overwhelmingly support Japan's quest for a permanent seat.

The increasingly vocal support of Japanese policymakers for the promotion and consolidation of democracy in Africa has also signaled a shift away from the historically apolitical nature of Japanese neomercantilism in Africa. For example, Japan has terminated bilateral foreign aid programs (except for emergency and humanitarian aid) to Sudan (1992), Gambia (1994), and Nigeria (1994). In each country serious human rights violations and the derailment of democratization efforts had brought widespread condemnation from the international community. The Japanese government has also sought to reward democratic initiatives, most notably by providing funding for elections and sending election observers.

Critics have pointed out that official Japanese support for democratization has been inconsistent. Japan continued to provide significant foreign aid to Kenya ($129 million in 1993 and $198 million in 1994) even though the authoritarian regime of President Daniel arap Moi had essentially stolen the 1992 presidential elections. 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 sub-Saharan Africa (second only to South Africa). Equally important, the neomercantilist imperative has ensured the continuation of trade relationships regardless of what happens on the foreign aid front. Japanese policymakers are usually hesitant to impose economic sanctions since such measures ultimately will have a negative impact on Japanese business.

CAN JAPAN LEAD IN AFRICA?

Japan's classic neomercantilist approach to Africa helped ensure that 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 content simply to reap the economic benefits of this new era, Japanese policymakers instead are seeking to take the lead in the previously neglected areas of African development and political-military security. If current trends continue, Japan will undoubtedly play an even more important role in security issues at the beginning of the new millennium, especially if it is granted a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Still, the Asian flu has important implications for the future of Japanese policy toward Africa. Throughout 1998 the combination of economic stagnation, banking crises, and corruption scandals had demonstrated the potential fragility of the Japanese economy. The worsening of these economic problems might change positive Japanese attitudes on foreign aid and prompt Japan to refocus its economic and political energies on its Asian "backyard"—the traditional area of emphasis for Japanese foreign aid and trade policies. Equally important, the severe financial crises gripping Japan's neighbors should serve as a stark lesson for African leaders previously enamored with the promise of Asian models of development. It is precisely for this reason that the so-called new bloc of leaders that has emerged in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda has cautioned against blindly imposing yet another foreign (in this case, Asian) model of development.

It would nonetheless be tremendously shortsighted to assume that the present financial difficulties in Asia will lead to a retrenchment of Japanese interests and involvement in Africa. The evolution of Japanese involvement in Africa from the early 1980s to the present demonstrates Japan's intention to translate its extraordinary economic power into global influence worthy of a political and economic superpower.