

Japan in Africa: The Politics of the Clair-Obscur ?

Le Japon en Afrique : la politique du clair-obscur?

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Abstract: Does Japan have an African policy? The answer may not be pertinent because Japanese involvement in this continent has been quite discreet and not much advertised.

Japan has enjoyed a long-standing and fruitful partnership with Africa mainly in the economic domain. It has also installed a small base in Djibouti, and deployed naval resources, as a part of the measures taken by other foreign powers and institutions to fight piracy off the coast of Somalia. However, Tokyo has refrained from engaging in the conflicts that have badly hit Africa or meddling in the continent's internal affairs.

This paper tries to shed light on Japan's multifarious achievements in Africa and assess the contributions this Asian power has made to promote the political emancipation and economic progress of the African continent. It also constitutes an attempt to underline Japan's role in Africa behind the obscure picture relayed by the media and the neglect observed in academic writings.

Keywords: Japan, Africa, economic partnership, major powers.

Résumé: Le Japon a-t-il une politique africaine ? La réponse n'est peut-être pas pertinente car l'implication japonaise sur ce continent a été assez discrète et peu médiatisée.

Le Japon entretient depuis longtemps un partenariat fructueux avec l'Afrique, principalement dans le domaine économique. Elle a également installé une petite base à Djibouti et déployé des ressources navales, dans le cadre des mesures prises par d'autres puissances et institutions étrangères pour lutter contre la piraterie au large des côtes somaliennes. Cependant, Tokyo s'est abstenu de s'engager dans les conflits qui ont durement frappé l'Afrique ou de s'immiscer dans les affaires intérieures du continent.

Cet article tente de mettre en lumière les multiples réalisations du Japon en Afrique et d'évaluer les contributions de cette puissance asiatique à la promotion de l'émancipation politique et du progrès économique du continent africain. Il s'agit également d'une tentative de souligner le rôle du Japon en Afrique derrière le tableau obscur relayé par les médias et l'abandon observé dans les écrits universitaires.

Mots clés : Japon, Afrique, partenariat économique, grandes puissances.

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1. Introduction

Among foreign powers heavily involved in African politics, Japan seems the most discreet and the most subtle. Unlike India, it is geographically far remote from Africa. Unlike France and the United Kingdom, it had no colonial past in Africa, and unlike China, it prefers to focus on the local human resources and the private sector. In contrast to Russia, it does not opt for a direct military engagement in African conflicts or civil wars.

However, Japan is present in Africa economically mainly, and seems not tempted to engage in polemics or create incidents. Paradoxically, academic writings and literature have paid little attention to Japan's immersion in Africa, precisely because this country was not inclined to make waves over its actions or crowd its achievements over the world's rooftops. Japan is anything, but a bullying, bulky, or a controversial partner of Africa.

Originating from fine arts, the term Clair-obscure refers to the repartition of light and shadow to create effects of contrast, harmony, movement and, even illusion. Drawing from Oxford language explanations, the Clair-obscure meaning seems close to the definition of twilight that refers to the soft glowing light from the sky when the sun is below the horizon, caused by the reflection of the sun's rays from the atmosphere. It pertains generally to the state of ambiguity and gradual decline (Oxford Languages).¹

In the case of Japanese involvement in Africa, 'contrast' is precisely the term to describe the nature and features of this partnership, because if Japan's presence in this continent has been discreet, it has proved however, efficient, credible, and mutually beneficial. Coincidentally enough, an expert on Africa-Japan relations rightly asserted that the new head of the

¹ Oxford languages and Google. Oxford Languages.oup.com.

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Japanese Governmental International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Akihiko Tanaka, fits the role of the discreet diplomat to a tee" (Sambira). ¹

Because Japan's policy in Africa does not match the quite uniform features of the objectives pursued by other world major powers in this continent, it may be not farfetched to assert, however, that the atypical characteristic of Japan 's involvement in Africa, like its international behaviour, seem dictated by a combination of some claims and theories of humanism and realism.

The discreet feature is certainly a quality and a good value, but it can be also confused with a timid engagement, and a kind of falling back compared to the bold policies of other world's major powers in Africa. Still, the discreet approach pursued by Japan in Africa may stem from the general features depicting the global external orientations of this country. A Japanese political analyst, Seizaburo Sato has argued that five basic attitudes have characterized historically the way Japan has viewed foreign policy over the last one hundred years:

- 1- A strong sense of belonging to Japan, coupled with deep-rooted feelings of inferiority,
- 2 -An intense concern about improving the country's international status,
- 3- A deep anxiety over being isolated internationally,
- 4- A desire to conform to world trends, and
- 5-An emotional commitment to Asia, which resulted in a policy that emphasized the region (Lumumba-Kasongo 2010).²

¹Sambira, J. Japan. Africa's subtle but effective partner,
<https://www.un.org/africarenewal/web-features/japan-africa%E2%80%99s-subtle-effective-partner>.

² Lumumba-Kasongo, T. (2010), Japan-Africa Relations, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Seazaburo admitted that these attitudes do not manifest themselves individually or collectively in determining the choices of Japanese foreign policy. Some dimensions may appear to be either weaker or stronger in some specific relationships depending on the nature of the international environment. However, it seems that he takes for granted the feelings of inferiority, anxiety, isolation, and the lack of resilience felt by Japan. If it is true that the defeat in World War II and the restrictions imposed on Japan by the US has confined this country to a lower military status, it remains that it had all the abilities to resist the US pressures, and contribute effectively in altering American hegemony over the world affairs and global economy.

Japan did not become an economic giant overnight. It has gradually moved from the control on foreign trade transactions pursued after World War II to a staunch advocate of trade liberalism, borrowed from the Western culture. This inspiration dates back to the era of Emperor Meiji (1868-1912), who attempted to emulate the industrialized world and get Japan out of its isolation, backwardness, and negative autarky.

The amazing ascension of Japan's economy in the late 1960s, through decisive technological innovations, high managerial skills, and a great sense of marketing, was abruptly refrained by the 1973 oil shock and the brutal decisions taken by the US President Nixon to surcharge imports, notably those coming from Japan, and cancel the convertibility of the Dollar to gold. The impact on Tokyo was even hard to sustain, perhaps because of the weak reaction of the ruling elites of Japan to curb world energy disturbances and US financial and trade measures.

By extrapolation, Japan's adaptations to changes affecting Africa after the impact of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the intricate war in Ukraine proved timid, though Tokyo has the ability to counter effectively the heavy presence of China, the sound incursions of Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf States in Africa.

It seems that the relative lack of aggressive leniency and boldness are still marking the conduct of Japan's African policy and explaining, to some extent, the politics of the clair-obscure, which does not express the potential, and the capabilities Japan can use to enhance its influence in

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Africa and compete with other foreign powers with much vigour and efficiency.

Japan has certainly the wisdom and the potential to humanise the relations with Africa to attenuate the vision of this continent deemed to remain as a scramble for raw materials and strategic concerns, as depicted by the world's major powers. Japan has never colonized Africa, it has never been a part of the confrontation between East and West on this continent and it has no substantial military presence in any country in Africa. For obvious reasons, it does not sell arms to Africans and thus, it does not fuel conflicts and civil wars in Africa. Thus, Japan can not only benefit from Africa but also learn from this continent's experiences and endeavours.

Concerning Africa, Japan may have some comparative advantages to prevail in its relationship with this continent. Beyond economic exchanges and financial inducements, Japan has a symbolic value to play off, which consists of the feelings of inferiority and humiliation it has suffered ever since its defeat during World War II, which may increase the links of understanding and solidarity between the country of the rising sun and Africa. Therefore, it may be not too ostentatious to claim that the duty of Japan may reside in its contribution to help transform Africa into a world powerhouse. Such a trend stems from the policy the Japanese leaders tried to incept towards Africa through evolving diplomatic phases. Indeed, they wanted to break with Japan's 'passive diplomacy' as a defeated nation in World War II and shift to 'proactive diplomacy' to shape the world order by showing the international community how Japan could take the lead in promoting African development (Shirato 2024).¹

This essay relies on three analytical parts: the first pertains to assessing the historical links existing between Japan and Africa. The second chapter consists of the evaluation of the specific strategy developed by Japan in its dealings with Africa, while the third part will explain why this country is somehow lagging in the competition that is increasing between the world's

¹ Shirato, K. (2024), Japan and the Global South, Centre for Strategic International Studies, 21 May 2024, -<https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-strategic-interests-global-south-africa>.

major powers over the riches of Africa, especially after the ignition of the war in Ukraine. It will also attempt to sketch out the new opportunities left to Japan to enhance its position and influence in the African continent.

The historical layout of Japan's relations with Africa

Relations between Japan and Africa are quite ancient but episodic and limited in substance and variety, compared to the ties entertained by other world major powers with this continent. Indeed, the Rising Sun is far remote from this continent and did not immerse in the colonial predicament concerning Africa. After the Cold War, Japan moved resolutely to forge economic links with this region, because it needed minerals and raw materials for its booming manufacturing process and needs Africa to enhance its international status and influence.

1-Ancient but scarce encounters

African people first visited Japan during the Sengoku period (civil war era in the 16th century mainly) as servants or slaves of European ships from Portugal and Spain. African presence in Japan did not disappear completely even when exchanges with overseas countries decreased under the national isolationist policy pursued during the Edo period (1603-1868). In Nagasaki, the records of judgments given by the magistrate's office include cases involving Africans then called Kurobō (black men). However, Kurobō referred to people with dark skin, including not only Africans but also people from Southeast Asia (Kaleidoscope, Chapter: 2).¹ Conversely, Unlike the Chinese, the Japanese did not massively migrate overseas, and thus, there were no human flows into Africa in the past and hardly a 'Japan town.'

Japan recorded a taste of African fruits with the cultivation of watermelons originating from the Kalahari Desert in South Africa and introduced to Japan in the 15th-16th Century via the Silk Road. Moreover, African art entered Japan before World War II, and in 1965, the "Tutankhamun Exhibition" took place in Tokyo, which millions of visitors

¹ Kaleidoscope of Books. Japan in Africa, Africa in Japan,
<https://www.ndl.go.jp/kaleido/e/entry/14/2.html>.

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attended. Conversely, combat sports such as Judo and Karate became widely used by Africans.

Perhaps the first official encounter between Japan and an African State occurred in 1930 when the Asian power signed a Treaty of Amity and Commerce with Ethiopia, the only independent country in Africa at that time. In the same year, a Japanese minister attended the coronation of Haile Selassie I, the emperor of Ethiopia. The next year, in 1931, an Ethiopian envoy visited Japan to return the favour.

In the past, links between Japan and Africa strengthened after World War II, when the Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie paid a State guest visit to Japan in 1956 which expressed Ethiopia's interest in Japan's economic development, according to Japanese media (Embassy of Japan in Ethiopia 2013).¹

Obviously, Japan's ties with Africa were limited to relations with Ethiopia, as other African countries remained under the colonial domination of European powers. Therefore, despite the gradual increase of interactions between Japan and other countries, which occurred during the Meiji era, the African continent remained closed to Japan's overture on the outer world.

Japan moved to establish a diplomatic representation in Addis Ababa in 1957 and Lagos in 1964. The first West African embassy to open in Japan was Ghana in 1960, which became independent in 1957. Ethiopia sent several diplomatic missions to Tokyo in a context marked by the Cold War and the struggle of many African colonies to obtain their independence from British, French, Belgian, and Portuguese dominations.

From a symbolic perspective, Africa made a sound presence during the Olympic Games held in Tokyo in 1964, when the Ethiopian athlete Abebe Bikila won the marathon outstandingly and amazingly. To a lesser degree, the Tunisian athlete Mohamed Gammoudi made also an African imprint on the Tokyo Olympic Games by stunningly winning the 10.000 m

¹ Embassy of Japan in Ethiopia 2013, Remarks by H.E. Hiroyuki Kishino, Ambassador of Japan to Ethiopia, 13 April 2013 <https://www.et.emb-japan.go.jp/as130401.html>.

race, outpacing the favourite world record holder of this distance at that time, the Australian Ron Clark.

Well after the independence of many African countries in the early 1960s, Japan did not have a proper and well-articulated African policy. It entertained a good relationship with South Africa, which the rest of Africa boycotted diplomatically and economically because of the policy of Apartheid pursued by Pretoria.

After the 1973 oil shock, Japan tried to develop its relations with Africa and rose to the rank of the largest donor of the African Development Bank, which it joined in 1983. However, Africa remained of a minor interest in Japan's global policy, because the weight of this continent, whether economic or political, was marginal in the Japanese perception of the primacy of development matters. Indeed, Africa suffered, at that time, from underdevelopment, political instability, and security problems.

According to a Turkish political scientist, Japan was pursuing two foreign policy principles in its dealings with Africa: 'Seikei Bunri' referring to separating economics from politics, and the 'Yoshida' Principle, which considers economic development as the primary goal of foreign policy (Cinar, 2022).¹

As Africa had a little to offer and because Japan was obtaining energy and minerals products from other parts of the world, the Rising Sun remained quite distant from Africa. Therefore, trade relations with Africa were also limited, as this continent accounted for just over 1% of Japan's imports and a little over 1% of its exports until 1990, while South Africa was the largest trade partner of Japan in Africa, representing 30% of Japan's exports to Africa and 50% of Japan's imports from this continent (Keiichi, 2024).²

2-The post-cold war engagement

¹ Cinar, Y. H. (2022).Japan's Africa policy: Power Struggle in the 'Rising' Sun. Daily Sabah. 28 September 2022.[https:// www.Daily Sabah.com/opinion/op Ed /Japans-Africa-policy-power-struggle-in-the-rising-star](https://www.DailySabah.com/opinion/opEd/Japans-Africa-policy-power-struggle-in-the-rising-star).

² Keiichi, S. (2024).Japan and the Global South. CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-strategic-interests-global-south-africa>.

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For a long time, the 'Yoshida' Doctrine shaped Japan's perceptions of the outer world because of the priority given to economic growth and the heavy reliance on the United States for security reasons. A political scientist considered the 'Yoshida' Doctrine as "a successful foreign policy, at least during the Cold War. Japan guaranteed its national security through alignment with the leading superpower, carefully nurtured its economic fortunes to the point where it emerged by the 1970s as the second-largest economy in the world, and largely rehabilitated the reputation as a responsible country that it had lost through imperialistic war" (Potter). It is evident that Japan had succeeded in becoming one of the most prominent economies in the world in the 1970s, thanks also to the US 'protection. A decade later, Japan's economic empowerment and ascension in international affairs faced obstacles imposed by the American administrations because of the fear that Japan may undermine US economic predominance.

Other Japanese scholars such as Inoguchi and Jain have characterized Japan's foreign policy style as "a karaoke diplomacy," by sketching out: "As with karaoke the background music, the American policy line, is predetermined; the only scope for the singer is in the style of delivery and policy implementation" (Inoguchi, T. and Jain, P. 1996).¹

In his book *Kaiyō Kokka Nihon no Kōsō* (Japan's Vision as a Maritime Country) published in 1965, Kosaka Matasaka depicted Japan as a 'maritime power' and described Japanese foreign policy as inward-looking and the Japanese nation as an 'island nation' (*Shima guni*). Such features contrasted unfavourably, the UK as a 'maritime nation' (*kaiyō kuni*) with an outward-looking foreign policy (Ward 2023).²

The inward posture taken by Japanese foreign policy and its alignment with US standpoints during the Cold War era have also restrained

¹ Inoguchi, T. and Jain, P. (Ed.). (1996) Japanese Foreign Policy Today. New York: Palgrave.

² Ward, R. (2023). Connecting Western and Japanese Strategic Thought from the Cold War to the War on Ukraine. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/12/introduction-japan-and-the-iiss/>.

Japan's overture towards the Global South in general and Africa in particular. An illustration of this discreet presence in the African continent consisted of the weakness of the diplomatic ties between Japan and its African partners. Indeed, despite the setting up of an Africa department within the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since the 1960s, it was not until 2001 that the first visit by a Japanese head of government to the continent took place (Najah 2024).¹

However, as ideological antagonisms withered away with the end of East-West confrontation, liberalism and trade exchanges became more prevalent between nations. In this context, Japan intended resolutely to benefit from the international détente and enhance its world power status. It also tried to express quite autonomous external economic options by strengthening trade exchange links with the Middle East and Africa, as both regions boasted energy and minerals, Japanese industry needed to sustain competition with other world powers.

As the Middle East remains a 'chasse-gardée' for the US and South America not far from American lusts, it appears that Africa represents a fertile ground for the ambitions of Japan as well as China. Their competition in Africa constitutes an extension of their long-standing feuds, and animosities, especially with Beijing's growing presence and influence in this continent. These dissonances consist of the legacy represented by the past colonial dispute, rivalry over regional leadership in Southern Asia, and the border conflict over the mining and fishing-rich Senkaku Island, an inhabited islet, but near off shipping lanes.

The competition between the two Asian powers in Africa became acute and important because of the increasing place this continent is taking in the perceptions of the world's major actors, and because of its mineral and energy riches as well as geostrategic assets. In a video message released at a Japan-Africa meeting convened in Tokyo in August 2022, Fumio Kishida, the Japanese Prime Minister declared, "African countries are gaining importance and influence on the international stage. Japan aspires to be a collaborative partner, fostering mutual growth with Africa"(Najah).² In addition, the 2009 edition of Japan's *Diplomatic Bluebook* referred to the

¹ Najah, R. (2023).Japan to strengthen Ties with Africa.https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20240708_2.html.

² Najah, R. (2023).Japan to strengthen, op, Cit.

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importance of diplomacy with Africa for the first time, by asserting that "Relations with Africa, with its abundant natural resources and an enormous, ever-increasing population, also carry great significance for the future of the Japanese economy" (Keiichi 2024).¹

The spearheads of Japan's African policy

To achieve objectives related to foreign policy, any State relies on various instruments, whether those linked to economic capabilities, military might, or those related to soft measures such as cultural values, for instance. Japanese approach towards Africa tended to accord particular attention to the policy of promoting mineral diplomacy, focusing on the human dimension and encouraging private involvement when dealing with this continent.

Against this background, Japan resolutely embarked upon a strategy to invigorate its economic relations with Africa. This strategy relies on four parameters:

1 -A specific policy of donation:

Japan did not emulate the approach pursued by traditional donors when dealing with Africa but preferred rather a donor-recipient relationship. It intended to break away from the form of assistance provided by world major powers during the Cold War because the Japanese leaders realized that this aid did not contribute to the development of African countries. The Head of the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Tanaka Akihiko clearly explained the substance of this new aid policy. He asserted that this new Japanese aid emphasized "people-to-people cooperation because it is important to contribute large sums of money which would build roads, dams, and power stations, but in addition to this, we would like to emphasize collaborative work to improve health conditions, collaborative

¹ Keiichi, S. (2024). Japan and the Global South. CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-strategic-interests-global-south-africa>.

work to improve education and collaborative work to improve agricultural sector"(Sabira).¹

However, the altruistic motivations underlined by Japan's distinctive policy of favouring the human dimension in its dealing with Africa did not fail to face allegations that Japan's designs aim, rather, at countering China's influence in this continent. When pledging, in a video link, to help Africa "deal urgently with issues such as unfair and opaque development finance," the Japanese Premier Kishida may have proffered a thought interpreted as "a swipe at China's lending practices"(Pajon 2024).²

The net Japan flows to Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for only 1.8% of its total Official Development Assistance (ODA), while 94.4% of these ODA went to Asia. Although this amount increased in the 2000s, Japanese ODA to Africa remained around \$1.5-1.7 billion per year since 2010 (Keiichi). Japanese investment flows into Africa have steadily increased over time, reaching roughly \$3bn in 2020 and more than doubling to over \$7.5bn, the following year. Moreover, Tokyo announced a \$34m donation to the World Food Programme to provide emergency support to 15 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Clynch 2024).³

In a nutshell, Japan had fallen to third place behind the United States and Germany as foreign donors in Africa, because of declining economic growth, aging population, and a relatively limited GDP (\$4.1trillion),

¹ Sambira, J. Japan. Africa's subtle but effective partner, <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/web-features/japan-africa%E2%80%99s-subtle-effective-partner>.

² Pajon. C. N. (2022).Japan's Africa policy: Back to Basics in Times of Crisis. 16 September 2022. Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI),. 16 September 2022 <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/publications-ifri/articles-ifri/japans-africa-policy-back-basics-times-crisis>.

³ Clynch, H. (2024). Japanese private sector gains ground in Africa but caution still reigns <https://african.business/2024/04/politics/japanese-private-sector-gains-ground-in-africa-but-caution-still-reigns#>.

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compared to that of China (\$17.7 trillion) and USA (\$27.3 trillion) in 2023 (Statista).¹

2- Institutionalized collective cooperation:

Admittedly, Japan was the first world power to institutionalize a framework of economic cooperation with Africa known as the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD). Thus, it has recognized the geopolitical potential of this continent, more than thirty years ago. Unlike France, however, it did not emphasize political or military dimensions concerns. It privileged a collective framework, rather than relations on a bilateral basis, and aimed to facilitate the implementation of initiatives for promoting African development under the dual principles of African ownership and international partnership.

The originality of TICAD is that this Forum operates in collaboration with the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (UNOSSA), the United Nations Programme for Development (UNDP), the African Union Commission (AUC), and the World Bank (JICA 2024). This Forum occurred every five years in Japan from 1993 to 2013, before scheduling it, every three years based on alternating its venue between Japan and another African country. Therefore, in August 2016, TICAD (VI) took place for the first time outside of Japan, in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, to express Tokyo's determination to work for a strategic partnership and ownership beneficial for both parties.

Since its inception in 1993, TICAD occurred eight times; twice in Africa (Nairobi and Tunis), while the last meeting will take place in Yokohama in June 2025. This sequence shows the exemplary regular basis of the convening of TICAD and the alternation of its venues between Japan and Africa. China also held its Forum for Cooperation with Africa (FOCAC) regularly since the inception of this gathering in 2000, but Beijing set up its cooperation forum with Africa 17 years after the establishment of TICAD I (1993). The second American-African Leaders Summit Forum

¹ Statista.com/statistics.

took place in 2022, eight years after the first gathering held under Obama's reign in 2014. India was a 'latecomer to the party' in setting up a legal cooperation framework with Africa since it convened its first India-Africa Summit Forum (IASF) in 2008 and has organized only three sessions of IASF since then, the last being held in 2015.

Concerning the initial TICAD meetings, Japan's contributions to Africa targeted primarily the areas of development assistance and poverty reduction. Other TICAD meetings focused on social development sectors, including education, health, and community development. Later TICAD meetings emphasized infrastructural investment and the effects provoked by climate change.

Japan's official discourse mentioned the importance of TICAD for Japan's foreign policy for the first time, when the 2010 edition of the *Diplomatic Bluebook*, referred to TICAD as the 'cornerstone' of Japan's diplomacy with Africa. The idea of using TICAD as a diplomatic asset for Japan gradually gained strength within the Japanese government (Keiichi 2024).¹ In 2012, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) created within its internal structures, the Department of African Affairs.

Besides TICAD, the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) held the 'Japan-Africa Ministerial Meeting for Resources Development' in 2013, to encourage Japanese enterprises to invest proactively in developing Africa's resources. The Ministers of Natural Resources from 11 African countries attended this meeting. Moreover, the Japan-Africa Business Forum 2014 was held in June 2014 in Tokyo on the theme, 'Succeeding in Africa: Unlocking Growth and Opportunities, ' with the collaboration of the African Diplomatic Corps (ADC) and the African Development Bank External Representation Office for Asia (ASRO).

Another instrument to promote investment in Africa by Asian enterprises consisted of Japan's collaboration with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the United Nations Commerce and Trade Organization (UNCTAD) to establish an Asia-Africa Investment Information Service Centre within SIBEXLINK of Malaysia,

¹ Keiichi, S. (2024). Japan and the Global South. CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-strategic-interests-global-south-africa>.

which represents a semi-governmental agency for information services through Internet.

The trade volume between Japan and Africa reached \$ 24 billion in 2023, a proportion remaining very far from Japan's global trade volume, which reached more than \$ 1.5 trillion in the same year. Japan exports to Africa mineral fuels, transportation equipment, land vehicles, engines general machinery, and foodstuff, while it imports platinum, manganese, vanadium sesame, and seafood. Japan's top three import sources in Africa in 2021 were South Africa (72.6%) Nigeria (5.5%) and Algeria (4%), while the top three export destinations in this continent were Liberia (25.1%), South Africa (24.5%) and Egypt (11.3%). Japanese companies have 927 locations in Africa, with 268 in South Africa, Kenya 103, and Morocco 103 (MOFA).¹ This number is far behind that of Chinese companies operating in Africa, which exceeded 10.000 firms and recorded a cumulative value of more than \$2 trillion from 2005 to 2022 (Foreign Affairs Committee).²

3- The practice of mineral diplomacy

Unlike many world major powers involved in Africa, Japan is the least country to harbour natural resources, as it imports nearly 100% of its needs in raw materials and remains doomed to search for critical mineral deposits or energy reserves so badly needed by its ever-booming industry. Such commodities are essential for Japan to maintain a leading position in the car manufacturing industry (particularly hybrid cars) and the electrical appliances industries.

1. Africa contains substantial oil and gas reserves, hard-core mineral deposits (iron-ore, phosphates, uranium, copper, and coal), and precious metals, such as diamonds and gold. In addition, it boasts abundant rare minerals such as lithium, cobalt, and nickel, needed for batteries and electrification technologies. It has also sizeable deposits such as cassiterite

¹ MOFA (2024). Call for Designs: 9th Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD 9) Official Logo https://www.mofa.go.jp/af/af1/pagewe_000001_00055.html.

² Foreign Affairs Committee. China Regional Snapshot: Sub-Saharan Africa. <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov>.

(the chief source of metallic tin), germanium (a brittle element used as a semiconductor), palladium (a metallic element used as a catalyst and in alloys), wolframite (a source of tungsten), monazite (a phosphate of the cerium metals), and cola used to produce gadgets like the Play Stations. As an illustration of Africa's mineral wealth and vital importance for innovative technologies, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) can influence the shape of the market of cobalt for instance, a mineral that reduces overheating in batteries and is essential in the manufacture of electric vehicles.

Not surprising, Japan has moved to carve out a place within the 'African metal club' with some discretion, the feature that characterizes Japan's African policy. In the last African tour of Kishida in June 2023, the first Japanese premier to go to Africa since 2016, the Japanese leader said his country "would act as an intermediary actor between developed G-7 countries and developing Global South countries." He hopes this cooperation "will be effective in various fields, especially food and energy security issues, "without forgetting to remind that the increase in food and energy prices in the Global South was" due to Russia's aggressive attitude toward Ukraine"(Cinar 2023).¹ Furthermore, the Japanese minister of Economy Trade, and Industry (METI), Nishimura Yasutoshi, led in August 2023, a delegation, including representatives from the Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security (JOGMEG), the Japanese organism responsible for raw materials in a tour of five African countries, Angola, Madagascar, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Namibia and Zambia. All of these countries boast large mineral reserves. The objective of this five-country visit aimed at laying down the ground for boosting investments in African critical mineral deposits. JOGMEG signed in August 2023 a series of contracts with three African countries to strengthen and secure minerals supplies essential to its energy transition (Najah 2024).² It may be exhaustive to cite the numerous projects Tokyo has conducted in Africa in recent years, but it remains worth to mention the deals contracted particularly with Namibia, Angola, and the DRC. In the latter country, Japan has committed to investing \$1 billion to explore rare

¹ Cinar, Y. H. (2022).Japan's Africa policy: Power Struggle in the 'Rising' Sun. Daily Sabah. 28 September 2022.[https:// www.Daily Sabah.com/opinion/op Ed /Japans-Africa-policy-power-struggle-in-the-rising-star](https://www.DailySabah.com/opinion/op-Ed/Japans-Africa-policy-power-struggle-in-the-rising-star).

² Najah, R. (2023).Japan to strengthen Ties with Africa.https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20240708_2.html.

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minerals in this country rich in cobalt, lithium, and copper. Tokyo signed with Zambia and Namibia, a memorandum of understanding to develop exploration and exploitation operations by Japanese companies, ensuring the supply of essential minerals to Japan.

4-The focus on human resources and the private sector

In practice, Japan shifted from a development assistance approach to encouraging private investments in favour of African economic and social sectors and conducted a policy oriented towards human development. Thus, it did not focus on the inter-governmental side or building infrastructures, as China is doing in Africa. Emma Ruiters, a senior analyst at the Tony Blair Institute in London explained, "Japanese companies have been doing quite a lot of strategic mergers and acquisitions to try and make an impact in the African market. They have been looking to acquire strategic local partners. This is very different to how China is operating in Africa at the moment" (Clynch 2024).¹

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, pledged \$30 billion in public and private assistance to Africa over a period of three years at the 8th TICAD summit held in Tunis. Such a huge amount reflects that his commitment towards Africa remains solid and sustainable and does not depend on conjuncture or episodic events. The contribution of the Rising Sun to African development does not target the pursuit of interests for selfish purposes and does not aim to favour African ruling elites, at the expense of African people. It rather aims to provide help to the unprivileged segments of the African population, permitting them to enhance their living conditions, boost their social promotion, and get access to modernity and the world of knowledge.

However, various academic writings argued that the Japanese distinctive approach favouring human development in Africa consists of an attempt from Tokyo to counter China's influence in this country. In

¹ Clynch, H. (2024). Japanese private sector gains ground in Africa but caution still reigns <https://african.business/2024/04/politics/japanese-private-sector-gains-ground-in-africa-but-caution-still-reigns#>.

conducting its development lending policy in Africa, Japan aimed to demarcate itself from the policy pursued by China, conceived as focusing on quantity rather than quality and the neglect of human rights and good governance. Contrary to its Asian neighbour, Japan prefers to invest in African human resources by providing training instead of exporting its workers as China did.

Prime Minister Shinzō Abe decided to grant \$60 billion in financial support relying mostly on private contributions, at the 2013 and 2016 TICAD summits. However, by 2019, Japanese direct flows to Africa reached \$12 billion, only half as much as in 2013. Japanese investments in Africa also dropped from \$590 million in 2019 to \$310 million in 2021 (Pajon 2024).¹This decline was due not only to the Covid-19 pandemic effects but also because to the reluctance of Japanese private firms to take risks in a continent perceived as unstable and unsafe for foreign investments.

Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) announced plans to hold the third Japan-Africa Public-Private Economic Forum in late 2024 to offer Japanese companies an opportunity to travel to Africa to undertake business development and networking. It also referred to the ministry's efforts to support Japanese business ventures in Africa such as Program and Expo 2025 Osaka. A high official from METI, Kazuko Nagura announced, "We have a program with Intel to train 9 million Africans in artificial intelligence and a coding for employment program to up skill up to 50 million youth." He added that the Youth Entrepreneurship Investment Banks (YEIBs) would further support tech-enabled companies and enhance

¹ Pajon. C. N. (2022).Japan's Africa policy: Back to Basics in Times of Crisis. 16 September 2022. Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI),. 16 September 2022 <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/publications-ifri/articles-ifri/japans-africa-policy-back-basics-times-crisis>.

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the collaboration with a new Africa-focused impact fund endorsed by Keizai Doyukai (AFDB 2024).¹

Is Japan slipping back in the new scramble on Africa?

The Japanese authorities made an announcement for the submission of designs for the official logo to represent TICAD 9 scheduled to take place in Yokohama in 2025. The logo aimed to "express the image of co-creation with Africa and hope for the future of fast-growing Africa, the greatest frontier of the 21st century" (MOFA 2024).² As set out, the projection consisted of conceiving Africa as 'the greatest frontier of the 21st century,' because of the outstanding achievements this continent is making in the economic sphere and power status enhancement.

This prospect for Africa inspired the author of this paper to publish an article in 2024, entitled "Africa: a New Scramble for World Powers or 'The Biggest Frontier of The 21st Century'?" In this essay, I attempted to discuss whether this continent will become a world powerhouse, or remain the target of the economic lust and geostrategic ambitions of the world's major actors (Iratni (2024b)).³ However, as the case of Japan is the subject of the present essay, I will try to assess if this country is losing ground in this competition and if it is still keeping a discreet approach towards Africa.

1-Africa in the eye of the storm after the Ukraine-Russia war

The looming new cold war, induced by the war in Ukraine, has generated the division of the world into informal alliances: the Western world

¹ AFDB. (2024). African Say African Development Bank Leaders. Press release 21 June. 2024. <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/press-releases/africa-offers-attractive-investment-opportunities-japanese-firms-say-african-development-bank-leaders-72097>.

MOFA b. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100498558.pdf>.

² MOFA b. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100498558.pdf>.

Iratni, B. (2024). A New Scramble for World Powers or the 'Biggest Frontier of the 21st Century'? *Algerian Review of Social and Human Sciences Africa*. 12. 1. 472-502.

traditional bloc encompassing the US and Western Europe, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other.

The Russian-Ukraine war affected Japan negatively by revealing the double vulnerability of this country concerning security and the need for raw materials:

-The security predicament:

Since its defeat in World War II, Japan turned its back on its past militarist doctrine to rely on the US military umbrella for the sake of its security. It had also embarked upon sound economic empowerment, thus, restraining its security policy, limiting its role in international crisis management, and refraining from military involvement abroad. Therefore, the Rising Sun was lucky enough that the expenses to finance security matters went to boost its economic power, because it relied on US military protection, as a bargain for Japan's rejection of arms build-up, after the Japanese defeat in World War II.

The war in Ukraine has awakened 'the old demons' by focusing again on Japan's security and military weakness as well as on the credibility to rely on American military protection. Although Tokyo endorsed the US appeal to urge its NATO allies to spend 2% of their GDP on defence expenditure), it remains that the security syndrome may still haunt the minds of the Japanese leaders in case their country came under attack and in case the US does not come to rescue. This eventuality constitutes, precisely, the great lesson learned from the war in Ukraine by countries heavily relying on other partners for security matters or expecting assistance from the so-called allies, as the example of Ukraine. Indeed, The US did not engage militarily to confront the Russian incursion and it even made substantial profits in selling gas to Europe to compensate for the interruption of the energy supplies from Russia. It is also noteworthy to remember the warning made by President Ronald Trump to urge his NATO allies, notably Japan, Germany, and South Korea, to pay for their security needs and defence requirements. Moreover, deterrence became highly critical for Japan's strategy after the war in Ukraine.

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Increasing the military budget and moving closer to the North Atlantic Alliance's standpoints, may also help Japan's efforts to enhance its bargaining power to struck a peace treaty with Russia that would enable the reclamation of part of the disputed Northern Territories It would also enhance Japan's position in its dispute with China over the Sunkaku archipelago with much resilience. It was, then not surprising, to notice that Japan welcomed the idea to form a common front against China and Russia, put forward during the meeting of the foreign ministers of the Group of Seven (G-7) held in Karuizawa, Japan, in April 2023 (Cinar 2023).¹

To appear as a responsible world actor and respectful of the international legality, the Rising Sun did not fail to condemn Russia's intervention in Ukraine, join the punitive sanctions decided by the US against Moscow, and pledge \$12 billion in support for Kyiv, over the past two years, making Tokyo one of the top bilateral donors (Nakano 2024).²

-The dependence on raw materials:

The war in Ukraine increased further the fragility of Japan's minerals sources, already shaken up by the disruption of the supply chain during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Global South remained divided over old geostrategic configuration and on Africa. Many African countries remained the target of foreign powers for economic interests and influence. The voting attitudes of African countries on Russia's intervention in Ukraine revealed also, a split in the African continent, as 28 countries joined the Western bloc in condemning Moscow's move.

The world's major powers inherited a great space in Africa after the war broke off in Ukraine and it is not surprising to notice, however, that

¹ Cinar, Y. H. (2022).Japan's Africa policy: Power Struggle in the 'Rising' Sun. Daily Sabah. 28 September 2022.[https:// www.Daily Sabah.com/opinion/op Ed /Japans-Africa-policy-power-struggle-in -the -rising-star](https://www.DailySabah.com/opinion/op%20Ed%20Japans-Africa-policy-power-struggle-in-the-rising-star).

² Nakano, Yuko.(2024). Japan's leadership on Ukraine.<https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-leadership-role-ukraine>

foreign competition over Africa's resources and geostrategic assets has extended, recently, to newcomers such as Turkey and the Gulf States (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates).

Africa is becoming more and more a scramble for empowerment and influence, amidst the multiplicity of foreign bases, the growing influence of China, the increasing interference of Russia and the Gulf States in civil war-torn African countries, and the expansion of terrorism in the Sahel-Sahara region and the Horn of Africa. Behind these foreign incursions, the scramble for Africa's mineral resources is looming, especially the precious and rare minerals needed by digital and innovation technologies that are flourishing in the Western world and Asia. Getting access to these sources of materials, whether through investments trade exchanges, or military presence and interventions, became a vital objective for the world's major actors to consolidate their geostrategic assets, strengthen their power capabilities to be better able to face the increasing competition for global hegemony and influence.

The leitmotiv of foreign powers in Africa intra-state conflicts in Africa concerns, primarily, the control of mineral resources and energy assets, beyond rivalries over the leadership. This is particularly evident in the case of Libya, Mozambique, the two Sudan, Mali, Niger, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Thus, it is not surprising to notice that some of the major world actors such as France, Russia, and China, and emerging powers such as Turkiye and the Gulf States have been heavily engaged in these conflicts, these last years. The collusion between the interests of these foreign powers and those of the warring factions in the war-torn African countries seems clear and pertinent. In this perspective, Japan has neither the required military capabilities nor the geostrategic ambitions to engage in these intricate conflicts. This posture may enhance Japan's presence in Africa, where populations are vehemently resenting foreign military intervention as it occurred in the Sahel-Sahara countries, in recent years.

In this rush for Africa's economic lust and strategic assets, the Biden administration started to deploy a strategy to catch up on the ground lost in this continent during President Trump's era. France is trying to maintain its

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presence and influence in West Africa, although it has lost substantial ground because it failed to combat terrorism in the Sahel-Sahara region. Russia, the 'late to the party,' explained that its concerns over Africa did not intend to participate in "a new partition of Africa, but to engage in a competition for cooperation with this continent," according to President Putin, when addressing the first Russian-African summit held in Sochi in October 2019 (Cayley 2021).¹ The Chinese leader Xi Jinping tried to translate China's dream based on "national rejuvenation and prosperity" into an African context.

On the economic level, African countries badly need agrarian products such as wheat, and soya, as well as fertilizers, especially after the defection of Russia and Ukraine, the two largest suppliers of these commodities to many African countries before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The effects of this war have severely hit the energy supplies of many African countries, and in such an intricate case, Japan can hardly come to the rescue, being one of the largest importers of oil and gas in the world.

2-New Opportunities for Japan in Africa

Japanese leaders affirmed that their country "pursues two major approaches to guide its relations with African countries, namely quality growth (inclusiveness, sustainability, and resilience) and human security (capacity building focusing on each individual in Africa)," (Japan/Gov.). Undoubtedly, African recipients have appreciated Japan's financial contributions, through the ODA mechanism, because of the high quality of Japanese technical assistance and the efficiency of project implementation. However, Japan's approach to economic cooperation with Africa proved more discreet than the ways other major powers are dealing with this

¹ Cayley, C. (2021). The Bear is Back: Russian Re-engagement with Africa is Picking up with Putin in the Driving Seat. [Africa Portal.org/features/bear-back-russian-re-engagement-africapicking-putin-driving-seat](https://africaportal.org/features/bear-back-russian-re-engagement-africapicking-putin-driving-seat).

continent. As Ruiters has put it, "Japan is much quieter, there is no hype, and there is not a big Japanese presence" (Clynch, 2024).¹

However, this dynamic is changing, because Tokyo is showing some concern about the presence of Russia and China in Africa, and considering their expansive policies as a serious threat to Japan's economic interests.

It appears that Japan intends to induce the Global South to join the G7 coalition in opposition to China and Russia. This ambition seems beyond Japan's power capabilities and influence, because the only country able to play this role is the US, indisputably. Even in this eventuality, Washington would not succeed in convincing the traditional allies of both Beijing and Moscow, which are numerous. Moreover, African countries prefer to stick to the principles of non-alignment "to avoid being pigeonholed as part of a Western position or an Eastern position," says Alex Vines, a Research Director at Chatham House (Vine 2022).²

There is a belief that a multipolar world would create geopolitical opportunities for Africa. A subtle option for Japan may be to get closer to the non-aligned movement and its African nucleus, at least on a rhetorical basis through the calls for multilateralism and a fair world order. Indeed, the new East-West confrontation may invigorate the role of this movement in world affairs and Japan may snatch at least some political benefits. Such an option seems tangible since Africa constitutes the hard core of the Non-Aligned Movement and the largest voting bloc in the United Nations General Assembly. Japan winning a seat in the UN/Security Council may depend on such a possibility.

If Japan is not emulating the model based on the State's control and one-party system China intends to apply in Africa, it did not attempt, however, to forge a model for Africa inspired by the Japanese philosophy of

¹ Clynch, H. (2024). Japanese private sector gains ground in Africa but caution still reigns <https://african.business/2024/04/politics/japanese-private-sector-gains-ground-in-africa-but-caution-still-reigns#>.

² Vine, A. (2022). There is a Massive Knockout from the Ukraine crisis in Africa, African Business. 25 April 2022. <https://African.Business>.

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wisdom. Indeed, it has focused on the respect of human rights, democratization, and liberalism that sound in the ears of Africans like schemes pursued invariably by the Western world. Probably, the merit of China remains that Beijing is not favouring the Western world model of development, which many Africans associate with past colonialism, the plunder of the continent's resources, and attitudes of arrogance and paternalism. The objective here is not to discuss which model is best, but to draw attention to the necessity to manage African sensitiveness and specific cultural values. The most important concern for Africans consists of enjoying a treatment with dignity and respect. This is what major powers have to learn from Africa.

If the ascendancy of the US over Japan's external behaviour can be explained by the defeat of Japan in World War II and by the syndrome of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, it remains, however conceivable, that Japan has the potential to conduct an autonomous policy that does not side systematically with the Western standpoints. In the end, the objective may consist of attenuating the feelings of humiliation and inferiority. Such a perspective would greatly appeal to large segments of the African people. In this respect, China has succeeded, to some extent, in upgrading the image of a backward and humiliated country able to a world major power, which contributes also to the development of the Global South. It may be not farfetched to signal that this Chinese attitude has won great credentials in Africa.

Like China, Japan turned inward and succeeded in becoming one of the largest economies in the world, through the pursuit of a path of development inspired by Western liberalism. Beijing also experienced a form of capitalism and encouragement to the private sector and foreign investments, without however turning back to ancient culture and values or communist precepts, at least, as far as the official discourse of China was concerned.

Japan, certainly has moved from militarism and the spirit of fighting adversely, but still, it has not promoted its ancient cultural values, sufficiently. It may have displayed some efforts to advertise its cultural ingredients, but still in a quiet fashion. Some of the core values in this country, such as altruism, doing the best, respecting elders, and collective

duties would appeal to Africans more than Western culture. Cultural enlightening proved useful for many world major powers to enhance the efficiency of their foreign policy. Symbols, artefacts, and immaterial means are of great moral value and pride for nations. They may serve also as soft power for States to sustain foreign policy.

To our knowledge, there are no many Japanese cultural centres in Africa and even the Japan Information and Culture Centre (JICC) in Nairobi is a part of the cultural and public affairs section of the Embassy of Japan to Kenya. In contrast, France has several cultural centres in Africa, while the Confucius Institute in South Africa and the Centre for Africa-China Studies have, separately, their premises at the University of Johannesburg. As a Swiss expert on Asian affairs argued, Japan has the great ambition to win a seat in the UN/Security Council, and to make this objective more achievable, it needs to display its soft power in terms of societal cultural and societal values in its dealings with the African continent.

Conclusion

Africa is changing at a high speed, but the world's major powers do not seem to pay much attention to these mutations and continue to handle these changes in an old-fashioned manner. One of the more worrying concerns remains that some of these actors continue to conceive this continent as a scramble for power and natural resources and as an arena of competition to enhance their power status and influence in world politics and the global economy.

Japan has solid ingredients to deal with Africa with ease and confidence because it never had colonial possessions in this continent, and is not engaging militarily in African conflicts and civil wars. However, it would be more opportune for Japan not to look at Africa through Western lenses and not consider this continent only through the prism of competition with China and Russia. It may not be erroneous to argue that Japan is, by all ingredients, an Asian power and sensitive to the pleas and dreams of the Global South. For its part, Africa expects to be a responsible and a reliable actor in international politics and not a mere sphere of influence for world powers. If Africa has a lot to learn from Japan, Japan has also a lot to learn from Africa.

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Japan needs also to conduct a long-term strategy with Africa to participate in making this continent a powerhouse in line with African development programs and future designs. Monique Nsanzabaganwa, the Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission, stated, "We aspire to forge a more robust partnership with Japan, characterized by enhanced dialogue, streamlined coordination, and increased support for AU initiatives." She added that "these initiatives will empower us to transform our political dialogue into focused and tangible actions, effectively addressing Africa's needs in alignment with the African Union Agenda 2063 and its Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan."(AU.Int 2024).¹

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