

A New Outlook on Africa: Reconsidering Japan's Foreign Policy

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Africa is important to Japan. In their minds, Japanese know this perfectly well, so why is it that Africa does not resonate in their hearts? Once more, as it did on the eve of its own modernization, Japan stands before two doorways, one labeled "Advanced" and the other "Undeveloped." This time we need an entirely new perspective as we decide what they mean.

Some years ago, when South Africa was still under apartheid rule, I was on a plane from Johannesburg to Nairobi, seated next to a blonde woman. Maybe it was the relief of leaving Johannesburg—staying in the South African capital as a member of the “yellow race” had left me tense and nervous—but for whatever reason, I struck up a conversation with her. I found myself telling her an anecdote from my sojourn in Senegal three weeks before.

Fetters on Foreign Policy

The capital, Dakar. In a café perched on a pier jutting out from the beach into the bay. Across the blue water on a hillside the presidential residence lay in white resplendence. An aperitif seemed like a good idea, and the garçon informed me that they served something called a “peaceful coexistence” cocktail that was made of coca-cola and vodka. How clever, I thought, to combine American coke and Russian vodka to create peaceful coexistence. Of course I ordered one, and it was really quite good. I expected my blonde seatmate to laugh with appreciative amusement when I finished my little story, but she knitted her brows together and frowned. “Vodka and coke,” she repeated. “Aren’t you really talking about coexistence of whites and blacks?”

That episode captured two realities that hindered Japan’s foreign policy toward Africa for a long time. One was apartheid, South Africa’s official policy of racial discrimination, and the other was the U.S.–U.S.S.R. confrontation. How did apartheid impede Japan’s diplomacy? Because our country had a huge volume of trade with South Africa, and because Japanese were treated as “honorary whites,” we took the economically profitable route and did not heed the voices from black Africa protesting racial discrimination. As for the U.S.–U.S.S.R. standoff, both sides purposefully interjected the East–West confrontation into conflicts in Africa, with the result that many of the disputes there were seen within the schema of the Cold War. Japan’s policy was unable to detach itself from that frame of reference.

High-volume imports to Japan from sub-Saharan African countries (2002)

(25 percent or more of total volume imported of that product)

(Unit: ¥ millions)

Product	Total import volume (A)	Import volume from sub-Saharan Africa (B)	proportion (B/A)
Total imports	40,938,423	439,722	1.1%
Platinum	330,800	144,353	43.6%
Ferro-alloy	109,705	29,535	26.9%
Cobalt mat	30,187	8,392	27.8%
Manganese ore	11,813	7,239	61.3%
Scrap nickel	12,801	4,772	37.3%
Cacao beans	6,603	4,381	66.3%

Traditional Aims of Diplomacy in Africa

Still, as Japan's economic power grew and the range of its political concerns widened, the importance of Japan's diplomacy in Africa (especially sub-Saharan Africa), became a topic of more active discussion. What meaning and purpose did it have?

From the late 1960s to the early 1990s one response was economic interests. The standard view was that Africa was a market for Japan's industrial output and a supplier of mineral resources and other primary products. Imports of some of the

primary products—cacao beans, for example—and some minerals, like manganese ore, were tied to the investment opportunities initiated by Japan for developing these products to make them available for Japan's import market.

Another response focused on political considerations. There was no denying the power of numbers in the United Nations, and with forty-seven U.N. member countries (about a quarter of the whole membership) located in sub-Saharan Africa, clearly the African vote carried weight. That was all too obvious in 1978 when Japan failed to garner the votes necessary to gain a seat on the Security Council as a nonpermanent member. Japan had to have been even more intensely conscious of the power of numbers as it tried to gather support for its call for reform in the United Nations and its bid to gain the status of a permanent member of the Security Council. Japan definitely had in mind the political clout of the African bloc when it called for the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in 1993.

Turnabout of Foreign Policy Toward Africa

By the middle of the 1990s, however, the traditional diplomatic approach to Africa was becoming outdated. For one thing, Africa's economic importance was diminishing. For a decade or so from the 1960s, nearly 10 percent of Japan's exports went to Africa (excluding South Africa), but by the end of the 1980s, that figure had fallen to less than 2 percent. Investment in Africa south of the Sahara also failed to grow (in the 1990s it was less than 1 percent of Japan's total economic investment), and as the Japanese economy continued to stagnate, Africa, a marginal market for both trade and investment, was gradually pushed into the background.

Another factor was the burnout of the "economic miracle" in East Asia, in which Japan had been the star. This phenomenon generated great interest in many parts of the world, and Japanese were particularly eager to see how the same kind of miracle could be wrought in Africa. But the inactivity of Japan's economy in the 1990s and the economic crisis that struck other Asian coun-

tries threw a damper on the once-enthusiastic drive to carry the "Asian experience" to Africa.

On the political front, with the dissolution of the East-West confrontation, there was an increasing tendency toward democratization and reliance on market forces. Any chance Japan might have had to develop its own diplomacy was sidelined by growing insistence from the Western democracies for concerted action as a group.

Japan's incipient independence in and basic concept for a tailor-made diplomatic strategy vis-à-vis Africa were somewhat weakened, and the emphasis was shifted to international cooperation and collaboration with the advanced Western democracies. Japan's African diplomacy became just one part of its foreign policy toward the United States and Europe. The new circumstances were best symbolized in the agenda of summit meetings; as if to echo the increasing attention given to African issues in top-level international meetings, African problems assumed proportionately greater importance in Japan's summit diplomacy.



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A Japanese "Flavor"

Even though Japan's foreign policy toward Africa was conditioned by its summit diplomacy, within those constraints the government nonetheless has tried to imbue it with a "Japanese flavor." Unlike the United States and Europe, Japan, having no debts to Africa from a history of colonial rule or the slave trade, thought it could play the part of bridge-builder. (For example, it set up in Malaysia the Asia-Africa Investment and Technology Promotion Center as a venue to bring more Asian businessmen into contact with Africa.) Japan also supplied capital and materials to encourage "South-South" cooperation and joint efforts among developing countries. One project was to get India involved with the economic development of East Africa, and another was to draw Tunisia into technical cooperation with Muslim Black Africa.

Seen from another perspective, however, Japan's part in these projects was aimed at playing down the Japanese flavor. U.K. International Development

Secretary Clare Short was one of the leading advocates of the view that economic cooperation must be carried out with national flags down. In other words, people should not be conscious of the national identities or “flavors” of the countries involved in economic cooperation. The international community began to push for joint economic cooperation—each country would divest itself of nationality in its participation and aim for joint planning and joint implementation.

There were several reasons for such strong insistence on collective action. In the first place, when assistance comes from a specific country it sometimes becomes strapped by strings attached, and it is all too easy to form unhealthy ties with the recipient’s government. When countries give assistance unilaterally, moreover, their efforts can overlap and it is difficult for the recipient country to adjust the programs and eliminate waste. In the end the effectiveness of the aid is eroded. In the second place, Britain and the United States in particular apparently wanted to send their own consultants to help manage the assistance because of their lack of trust in the African governments’ management ability. Now that international collaboration was the *modus operandi* where African needs were concerned, how Japan could distinguish its contributions remained a delicate question.

Dangers Posed by Africa’s Problems

In the meantime, the passage of time could not be stopped. The need for international cooperation for Africa has acquired an urgency that far surpasses just the coordination of aid policies. The scale, frequency, and intensity of internal wars, uprisings, and poverty—afflictions that are collectively called Africa’s problems—have been exacerbated by progressive globalization of the world’s economy and the end of the Cold War. They pose a danger not just to Africa. It has become increasingly clear that areas outside Africa, even international society as a whole, could be adversely affected if nothing is done to tackle the problems of Africa.

Fluctuations in the supply of primary products from Africa caused by internal conflicts interrupt flows of goods throughout the world, and Africa’s huge accumulated debt impacts the global financial system. Refugees from Africa going primarily to Western countries, especially Europe, create social disruptions. Added to those are the danger of the spread of AIDS and other infectious diseases, deforestation, rising volumes of greenhouse gases, and the connection of some of the poorer countries with terrorist strongholds and training grounds. All these are “Africa’s problems,” yet they are bigger than Africa. They are problems of the entire world, including Japan.

That is why, no matter what it takes in capital and materials, the cost of helping Africa to solve these problems will be much lower than the ultimate cost of doing nothing. The Japanese view has come around to this conviction: to provide a part of the necessary capital and materials is a far better choice than the sacrifice that would ensue if we abandon Africa.

Unreasonable Lack of Passion

Japanese can fully comprehend all of these African problems. Thanks to a number of endeavors, large and small, Africa's difficulties and needs have begun to attract more understanding. Public opinion has been educated through information about the diplomatic activities in Africa of Diet members, the activities of NGOs, the work of Japan's national corps of overseas volunteers and the Self-Defense Force personnel sent to Africa, as well as Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro's visit there in 2001, the first by a Japanese prime minister. All these efforts are valuable and should be continued.

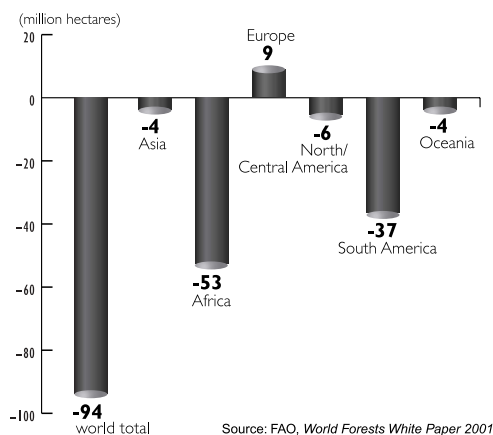
We must face some harsh realities, however, that will require of us more than an intellectual understanding of the issues. On this point, it may be harder in Japan than in other countries to awaken enthusiasm among citizens for the nation's foreign policy toward Africa.

In countries around the world something resonates among people when the subject of Africa comes up. In the United States, there are associations with the slave trade and the many black Americans with roots in Africa. There is the Africa of Hemingway and other writers. Europeans have David Livingstone, Albert Schweitzer, and so many others to remember, as well as economic interests and the legacies of historical responsibility from colonial rule. For Britain, France, Belgium, Italy, and Portugal, there is the thrust and parry of competition past and present over Africa. To China, Africa has been a huge laboratory to experiment with foreign policy in the Third World and the focus of a scramble to outdo Taiwan in their aid-race in that continent.

What about Japan? While Japanese can understand economic explanations with no trouble, they still seem unable to feel any personal, visceral response. Many Japanese are perfectly aware of how easily Africa's wars can spill over into neighboring territories, ripple into conflicts in other regions, and erupt into international conflagrations. A conflict in one area can put transportation and communication systems all over Africa at risk, disrupting the distribution of goods and materials on an even wider scale. Japanese know the dangers of globalization of conflicts, but this knowledge does not necessarily move their hearts. Is there no connection between Africa and the personal concerns,

Deforested Area

(from data covering the decade 1990-2000)



Debt of Sub-Saharan African Countries

(\$ millions)

Year	1970	1980	1990	2000
Debt	6,921	60,898	176,883	215,794
(Excl. S. Africa)	6,921	60,898	176,883	190,933

(from *Global Development Finance 2002*)

The balance between what is “advanced” in Africa and what is “backward” is extremely fragile.

the individual lives, of Japanese? Without that connection, for the Japanese of tomorrow the African issue will always be something that they understand intellectually, but not in their hearts.

Advanced Africa

Japanese must find an emotional bond with Africa, in addition to their intellectual comprehension. I feel this strongly because I believe that in many areas Africa evinces an advanced grasp of human life and society that could help Japan’s highly industrialized, cutting-edge, technological society become a more human society in the future.

To begin with, Africa has something to teach Japan about identity in international society. In race, religion, ideology, and culture, Africa is a melting pot. Indian, Islamic, and Western civilizations coexist there, dwelling side by side with the indigenous civilizations of Africa to create an overlapping multiplicity.

At the same time, African identities were fractured when tribal groups were torn apart by colonial rule and artificial boundaries. Africans have learned to shift their sense of self in relation to state and ethnic group, tribe and religion, and to find a balance between their self-awareness as Africans and their assimilation of Western values. The shifting African self-identity is sometimes tribal, sometimes religious; at other times it becomes a broader ethnic, national or racial sense of self. And there are times when it is a consciousness of belonging to the African continent.

For today’s Japanese, on the other hand, beyond their sense of self as individuals there is only their consciousness of being “Japanese.” (Of course there are villages and prefectures, but all such areas of “belonging” are internal—they do not transcend the nation.) Africa has not been completely successful in forming enduring nation-states, but it is precisely for that reason that it is poised to stand as a model of the shape of things to come in the international society of the future. For it is really many Africas, created out of diverse educational traditions and places of education, different cultures passed on through education, indigenous cultures, linguistic cultures, ethnicities, races, and nations. Africa is indeed a continent of multiple floating identities.

Tomorrow’s Japanese will not be well served by a narrow self-identity that is formed in reference solely to our own country, the identity of the nation-state. We are going to need a wider, more flexible sense of ourselves. Japanese must take a hard look at the “floating identity” of Africans and understand it not as something backward but as a progressive sign in a civilization that we can learn from.

Second, Japanese have much to learn from African patterns of symbiosis between humans and nature. Those life patterns can teach us the real meaning of preservation of nature and about the dignity of human existence in and with nature, not separated from it. Modern Western civilization exploits

nature, destroys it, then reflecting on the damage, tries to “preserve” it. Conservation policies are vital to protect endangered species and safeguard natural diversity, but the real problem is how humans choose to live in the first place. The essential choices, therefore, concern how humans coexist with animals, with plants; in short, whether or not we live in lasting symbiosis with all that is in the natural environment. Humans use nature and they also defer to the forces of nature. We can find many African societies that respect nature and preserve it very well.

Protecting whales, for example, is not just a matter of not hunting them. That alone will not preserve a balanced ecological system. There has to be a sustainable balance between the way humans use and protect whales. Africa's respect for symbiotic relationships contains lessons for us, especially about what the preservation of nature really means.

This is also related to the problem of preserving as opposed to promoting art and sports, for example. It is all well and good to challenge people to test the limits of their abilities and let their talents fully flower, but the pressure today to specialize and the trend toward commercialization in art and sports lead to all kinds of abuses. To focus too obsessively on skill and technique is to increasingly alienate people from normal life. Art has become an endeavor performed for specialized groups, and too many sports have become a venue for high compensation and competition for prize money. Athletics are fast being reduced to statistics of wins and losses. It is our loss. For Africans, art, music, and sports are still an active part of everyday life; they belong to the people who practice them and they endure as part of their lives.

That is the message from Africa: the real value of art, music, and sports is experienced by the people who are engaged in them, not the onlookers. The basic point is that if high-tech, cutting-edge, industrially powerful Japan wants to become a society where people can live with a sense of fulfillment and well-being in the future, it has to find ways to restore our symbiosis with nature, art, sports, and music to everyday life. It is Japan's task, and the world's task, to discover how to make Africa's advanced ways of life thrive in our technologically developed, industrial societies.

One more thing: The balance between what is “advanced” in Africa and what is “backward” is extremely fragile. The Western idea of “development,” with its premises of economic growth, growing populations, the spread of Western-type education, urbanization, and so on, tore African societies apart and denigrated Africans' highly developed understanding of life patterns as “backward.” It is a problem that occurred not just in Africa.

Consider the stories we hear about black Americans who are born into poverty, leave the ghetto, and acquire a good education. They join the middle class, at which point they distance themselves from family, former friends and community, and in the process experience increasing agony over their identity. One thing echoes in these stories: modernization and economic development have set Africa onto a quest for a new identity. If so, the difficulties

Africa is experiencing have roots in the same causes that produced problems Japan has experienced since it set out to modernize a century and a half ago. Particularly now, when Japan has become economically wealthy and politically more “mature,” we need to rethink those problems. In that sense, Africa’s problems are Japan’s problems.

Two Doorways

Flashback to the 1970s. I am making a connection in Johannesburg on my way from Gabon and have enough time for a rest room visit. Confronted with two entrances, each with its respective sign—“White” on the left and “Colored” on the right—I stop before them and think. If I enter on the “Colored” side, there should be no problem. But if I use the “White” side, will someone accost me, “Hey, you! You’re in the wrong place,” and drive me out? It will take courage to retort in a fury, “I have every right to be here!” Yet to use the “Colored” side will only prove that I am, indeed, daunted. In a second, with that thought I stride through the “White” doorway. A few days after that, I realize that what would have taken real courage was not to challenge an attempt to drive me out of the white side, but to go into the colored side, to share the humiliating experience of racial discrimination myself and find solidarity with those who are discriminated against.

It seems to me that Japan’s recent past can be read as a history of sacrificing Korea, riding roughshod over China, and violating much of Asia, all so that Japanese could somehow become “white,” or achieve the same kind of successes as we thought white people had. Japanese suppressed a part of their identity and tried to change themselves, and in the process, didn’t they lose something of themselves?

Today it is possible that Japanese stand, hesitating, before two doorways that we are so used to seeing that we no longer see them. For Japanese, instead of “White” and “Colored” signs, what we have long taken for granted are the labels “advanced” and “undeveloped.” Can we go on this way? If we seriously ask ourselves this question, we come to understand, I think, how Africa’s problems come to be Japan’s problems, and Japan’s come to be problems for Africa, too.

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