

Japan-Africa Relations in the Twenty-first Century

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“There can be no world stability and prosperity in the twenty-first century without resolving the problems pressing in on Africa”—the first official visit by an incumbent Japanese prime minister lays the cornerstone for a revamped Africa policy.

The visit by Mori Yoshiro, then prime minister, to South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria from 7 to 13 January 2001 was a significant event in the history of Japan's foreign relations, and marked the opening of a new phase in relations between Japan and the countries of Africa. Although precedents exist for trips to Africa by ex-prime ministers of Japan—including, recently, Hashimoto Ryutarō's 1999 tours of Kenya and South Africa (January) and Nigeria and Ghana (late May to early June)—Mori's was the first state visit to Africa ever made by a Japanese prime minister still in office.

Comparing that record with visits by African leaders to Japan, the contrast is startling. The first postwar state visitor from Africa was Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, who came in 1956. Others followed, and since the late 1950s and early 1960s, when many African nations gained independence, visits to Japan by kings, presidents, and other head-of-state-level dignitaries from Africa have taken place almost every year and often several times a year. In return, not one incumbent Japanese prime minister put any country in Africa on his official itinerary during the entire twentieth century. While Japan's huge export surplus in its trade with Africa has been an issue for some time, the failure of its highest state leaders to visit any country on that continent until 2001 points to heavily one-sided traffic in the area of top-level diplomacy as well. Prime Minister Mori's African visit was therefore

all the more important in helping to correct, albeit only slightly, the diplomatic imbalance.

So Distant for So Long

Mori's trip calls to mind the African visit by Kimura Toshio, foreign minister at the time, more than a quarter of a century ago. In late October and early November 1974, Kimura went to five countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Zaire [now the Democratic Republic of the Congo], Tanzania, and Egypt). Because it was the first official visit to Africa by a Japanese foreign minister, Kimura's tour also generated considerable attention. Much of the interest stemmed from surprise—the surprise many people felt when they realized that no incumbent Japanese foreign minister had ever before visited Africa—and a certain incredulity that relations between Japan and the countries of Africa could have remained so distant for so long. I suspect that many Japanese in January this year had the same reaction to Prime Minister Mori's three-country African visit.

The timing of Kimura's trip raised a few eyebrows. When the first oil shock hit Japan in October 1973, as a result of the fourth Arab-Israeli war, resource security quickly surfaced as a large and pressing issue. Inevitably, the Kimura journey to Africa, coming almost exactly a year later, was regarded as part of Japan's “resource diplomacy.” In fact, however, during their five-country tour, the Japanese side showed an active interest and willingness to engage in

the problems facing African countries. Explicit about Japan's opposition to colonialism and racial discrimination, they pledged their country's moral support for struggles toward national liberation. In recognition of the new circumstances as African countries rushed to reorient their priorities toward economic development, they unveiled an expanded policy of economic and technical cooperation. These efforts were acknowledged in Africa and widely appreciated.

The same year, 1974, also marked the start of a dramatic upturn in both the actual amount of Japanese official development assistance (ODA) to Africa and the proportion of total ODA earmarked for Africa. In 1973, Japan's bilateral ODA to African countries came to \$18,580,000 (2.4% of total bilateral ODA); in 1974 it was \$36,350,000 (4.1%) and in 1975 it had jumped to \$59,070,000 (6.9%).

In point of fact, Japan had already begun to formulate a position toward Africa that was more involved and positive than in the past. In early June 1974, for example, some five months before Kimura embarked on his trip, the Japanese government announced measures to suspend sporting and cultural exchange with South Africa. That August, Japan was the first of the nations in the Western camp to recognize the government of Guinea Bissau, which had finally achieved independence after a long armed struggle against Portuguese rule.

Dilatory Summit Diplomacy

Nonetheless, in top-level diplomacy toward Africa, Japan has lagged behind both the other industrially advanced countries and Asian countries as well. China sent its first delegation of top-level leaders to Africa in 1963. Led by Premier Zhou Enlai and Foreign Minister Chen Yi, the visit extended from December 1963 into February the following year. Granted, this overture was part of China's own global strategy. China's obvious intention at the time was to lay the groundwork for a broad united front against the United States at the second Asia-Africa Conference, scheduled for June 1965 in Algiers (it was eventually canceled). The fact remains, however, that Zhou Enlai's party completed a large-scale tour that reached ten countries and



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lasted for a month and a half. The Chinese premier used his time in Africa well. Together with the leaders of his host governments, he affirmed a five point framework of political relations and an eight-point framework of foreign aid, taking the opportunity to develop closer relations between China and Africa. Although China's supportive attitude toward Africa temporarily abated when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, it regained its momentum later, and diplomatic visits to Africa by Chinese heads of state have continued intermittently since then.

Mori's visit, coming thirty-seven years after Zhou's, was decidedly more modest. Lasting barely a week and covering only three countries, it could hardly be called “tour.” Even so, it signaled Japan's long-overdue entry into the realm of African diplomacy at the highest government level, which gave the visit special and lasting significance not only to the countries of Africa, but also to the international community as a whole. There was nothing perfunctory about Mori's

trip. As will be discussed further below, Japan's Africa policy, particularly in developmental assistance, has been growing steadily since the end of the Cold War era. Aimed at reaffirming Japan's intention to bring more substance and vitality than ever before to the nation's relations with African countries, the visit by Mori and his delegation gave an emphatic boost to a trend already established in Japan's foreign policy.

Although presumably the trip was also meant to gain votes in support of Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council by influencing the outcome of proposed U.N. reforms, this aspect of it should not be overstated. Much more important is to recognize its meaning as an expression of Japan's renewed determination to address the problems African countries face in the twenty-first century, and to

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ensure that Japan sustains the commitment it has made and continues to act on it, now and in the future.

Mori's encounters with national leaders in Africa did not, in fact, leave an impression of currying diplomatic favor through displays of token generosity. The prime minister offered no significant diplomatic "gifts" to his hosts and focused instead on laying out the underlying concepts and basic thrust of Japan's Africa policy. In a speech he gave in South Africa, the first stop on his itinerary, Prime Minister Mori voiced the opinion that there can be no world stability or prosperity in the twenty-first century without resolving the problems pressing in on Africa. This was a clear reaffirmation of Japan's understanding that it must formulate its Africa policy from a global perspective on African issues. He continued to say that Japanese support and cooperation in tackling African issues was a priority in his government's global diplo-

matic agenda, and that Japan intended to approach those issues through interrelated measures for development assistance, conflict prevention, and aid for refugees.

The shift in Japan's post-Cold War African policy was clearly evident in the Tokyo International Conferences on African Development (TICAD I and II), which were held in October 1993 and October 1998, respectively. These were major events, attesting to Japan's effort to play a more active and positive role in providing development assistance to Africa. Prime Minister Mori's African tour was part of the same long-term endeavor, and it certainly helped to raise Japan's profile in African foreign relations. It is not enough, however, for relations between Japan and African countries to change and grow stronger only at the governmental level and only in the area of development assistance. Ultimately it is the people of Japan who affirm and benefit from a more positive involvement with Africa, whether through government or private sector activities. In short, the success of the reinvigorated approach to African issues depends on rising interest in and awareness of Africa and the African people among the wider Japanese public.

A Sense of Distance

For generations, Japanese have perceived Africa as being a vast continent far removed from Japan. Geographically, Japan and Africa are separated by a great distance, but the psychological distance may be just as great. In our era of high-speed international travel and a dramatically increased population of Japanese with international connections and experience, many Japanese feel entirely comfortable in places just as far removed. Yet the sense of distance from Africa has changed little from generations past.

It is not surprising that the far-away image of Africa remains strong. Historically, relations between Japan and Africa have been nonexistent, weak, or tenuous, and even now, not much has changed. Consider some statistics on people-to-people exchange and individual contact. Of the fifty-three countries in Africa, in October 1998 only two had more than a thousand resident Japanese nationals: the Republic of South Africa (2,747) and Egypt (1,001). Others with

significant numbers of resident Japanese included Kenya (810), Tanzania (301), Ghana (253), Morocco (243), Zimbabwe (236), and Zambia (225). The majority of African countries have only a few to several dozen Japanese residents, and some have none at all. (Source: Supplement to Gaiko seisho [Blue Book on Diplomacy], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000.)

According to Ministry of Justice statistics, the number of Africans who entered Japan in 1999 for short-term stays or specified activities was just 9,616. (Source: Hirano Ken'ichiro, ed., *"Tai-Nichi kankei" o shiru jiten* [Dictionary of Foreign Relations with Japan], Heibonsha, 2001.) Given such meager human ties, it is no wonder that Japanese and Africans feel psychologically distant from one another.

The perception of Africa as a far-off continent is no less pervasive in the thinking of the Japanese government. There is simply no precedent for focused, active contact. From the Meiji Restoration (1868) to World War II, Japanese never had a distinct perception of Africa even at the government level, and that situation changed little during the postwar period. Opportunity arose after the late 1950s and early 60s, when many African states achieved independence from European colonial rule, but the prevailing attitude in the Japanese government was that it was up to the advanced nations of the West to promote African development. The idea that those countries should bear the bulk of responsibility was not deeply questioned in Japan, and as a result, the paucity of contact between it and the countries of Africa seemed only natural to most Japanese, if they thought about it at all.

New Perception Needed

Such indifference has no place in today's world. The African continent accounts for more than twenty percent of the world's total land area, it holds over ten percent of the world's population, and it is rich in natural resources. Despite its ample potential for development, Africa remains burdened with a brutal colonial past – its negative legacy from history – which partly explains why it has reached the twenty-first century without having gained a proper foothold for development. Today the continent is afflicted with a range of

extremely serious problems, including frequent political strife, worsening poverty, refugees, environmental damage, HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, food shortages, and overpopulation. These are issues that require united cooperation and assistance from the rest of the world. Clearly the economically advanced nations have an important role to play in what has to be a global approach to Africa's problems.

There is an international consensus that world stability and prosperity in the twenty-first century cannot be achieved unless Africa's problems are resolved. As one of the leading developed nations, Japan can no longer afford to remain uninvolved and indifferent. Today there is nothing "natural" or understandable about the seriously underdeveloped ties between Japan and Africa. The notion that the rest of Asia, being geographically and historically closer to home, should be Japan's first priority and Africa a secondary concern, at best, no longer holds true. In the twenty-first century, physical distance between nations or regions can have no defensible bearing on a country's international relations or foreign policy.

Standing among the leading developed nations of the world, Japan, too, has a responsibility to address problems in all regions and countries, including Africa. Increasingly, foreign policy in this century is expected to be shaped by the need for a global approach to the most critical situations and problems. Now sagging under difficulties of unthinkable magnitude, the region of Africa urgently requires the world's attention, and for that reason it should be growing closer and looming larger in the perception of Japanese. The image of Africa as distant and unconnected has to change, among both government officials and the general public.

Toward a Revitalized Africa

During his January visit, Prime Minister Mori stated that addressing Africa's problems was one of the top priorities in Japan's global foreign policy. In formulating foreign policy today, it makes sense to distinguish provisionally between issues that should be treated globally because they concern the international community as a whole, and those relating primarily to national interests, and to deal with them separately.

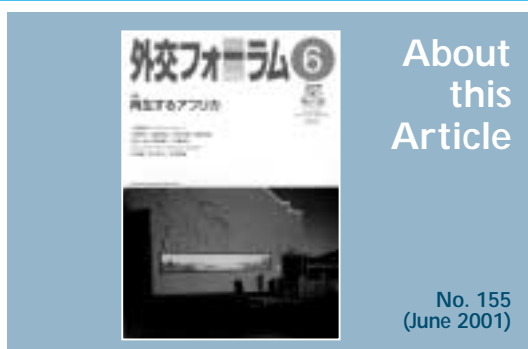
As I have stressed repeatedly, the problems facing Africa today are the former type—they have a worldwide impact and must be tackled through a global approach. For that reason they are counted among the highest priorities in Japan's global foreign policy. Considering the broad picture, it is also appropriate to pursue Japan's Africa policy through the interrelated tasks of development assistance on the one hand and conflict prevention and refugee aid on the other.

One important policy the TICAD II in October 1998 adopted was the Tokyo Agenda for Action to support African development in the twenty-first century. With the goals of alleviating poverty and integrating Africa into the world economy at its core, the Agenda recognizes the need to reinforce African countries' "ownership" and donor countries' and organizations' "partnership" in the effort to achieve sustainable development. To clarify and distinguish between ownership and partnership also reflects an appropriate understanding of the project at hand. The Japanese government used the occasion of Prime Minister Mori's visit to Africa to declare Japan's renewed commitment to African issues and to identify the main tasks to be undertaken, and in so doing plotted the course of its Africa policy for the coming years.

Major items in Japan's agenda for partnership in development assistance to Africa have also been spelled out. These include plans for a preliminary ministerial conference in Tokyo in December 2001 in preparation for TICAD III in 2003; the earmarking for Africa of as much as possible of the \$3 billion (over a five-year period) that the Kyushu-Okinawa summit meeting budgeted to combat contagious diseases; and support and assistance in information technology. To develop these efforts effectively, Japan must engage in fruitful policy dialogue with African countries, which means that Japanese need to gather and systematically analyze ample information about Africa. So far the efforts on this front by both the government and the private sector (research facilities, NGOs, companies, etc.) have been inadequate. At present, moreover, public-private cooperation in this area is still done only piecemeal; a comprehensive and coordinated system has yet to be developed.

It is also important for the countries on the

African side to gather and analyze information about Japan. Mutual understanding is essential in generating productive interplay between "ownership" (self-help) and "partnership" (working with outside assistance), and cultural exchange provides a solid foundation on which to build such understanding. A plan for Japan-Africa exchange that was announced during Prime Minister Mori's Africa visit involves reciprocal visits by a total of six thousand people—mostly youth and young leaders—over a three-year period. In his South Africa speech, Mori noted that at present there are around four hundred African students studying in Japan and roughly seven hundred Japanese youth volunteers working in Africa. So far, this has not been enough. The exchange of six thousand people over three years is unlikely to accelerate the process of mutual understanding to any significant degree. Many tasks remain, along with the challenge of increasing the level of ownership by African countries. Given the near-impossibility of achieving visible results quickly, particularly in development assistance and conflict prevention, both the government and the people of Japan must be prepared for a sustained effort. Tackling and resolving the urgent problems facing Africa will require a long-term perspective and perseverance.



About this Article

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Translated from the original Japanese, "Niju-isseiki no Nihon to Afurika no kankei o kangaeru," published in the June 2001 issue of *Gaiko Forum*. This issue, featuring "Renaissance in Africa," focused on Japan's strategic policy toward Africa. Articles in this issue sought to show how the incumbent prime minister's visit to the continent in January 2001 opened a new chapter in Japanese global policy, breaking away from assistance-oriented diplomacy and seeking to contribute to the resolution of problems in Africa.