

Emerging Trends in Japan-Africa Relations: An African Perspective

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In January 2001, Yoshiro Mori made history by becoming the first-ever incumbent Prime Minister to visit Africa. Why did he decide to do this? What is the significance of the timing of the visit? What could we learn from the Japanese diplomatic style exhibited during the visit? What was the basis for selecting only three countries out of more than fifty nations as the tour's destinations? We argue below that the need to maintain continuity in Japan's post-Cold War Africa policy, the leadership style and priorities of the Prime Minister, as well as broader considerations of the nation's vital interests are all factors affecting Mori's decision to visit Africa. It is our premise that Japan-Africa relations can be best understood only if viewed broadly as a function of the interplay between economic power and asymmetric interdependence on the one hand, and culture and diplomacy on the other.

We begin by conceding that the ensuing discussion has a limitation: throughout the Prime Minister's visit to Africa as well as prior to the visit and in its aftermath, the major Japanese media did not cover the background or analyze the overall implications of the trip sufficiently. Virtually all the major electronic and print media kept silent after announcing on 7 January 2001 that the Prime Minister had left that day on a 5-day tour of three African nations. It is, of course, true that there was a sudden surge of interest for a while in Prime Minister Mori when he was almost halfway through his tour. But the issue that sparked interest was his usage of politically incorrect language relating to pre World War II Asia, and not Africa or Japan-Africa relations.

Given the limited preoccupation with Africa in Japan, the media silence was not at all surprising. An editorial in *The Japan Times* thus echoed the widespread feeling in the country: "Africa is a long way from our daily concern."² Inevitably, also, the total silence makes an attempt to analyze the high-profile visit and gauge the public opinion in this regard an extremely difficult enterprise.

When Prime Minister Mori left for Africa, he had barely finalized the official re-structuring of government ministries. Given the enormous domestic pressure he was under, it is fair to first ask what compelled him to undertake the first-ever prime ministerial visit to Africa. When we begin to analyze prime minister Mori's visit to Africa one helpful analogy that springs to mind is President Bill Clinton's visit to the continent three years earlier. When Clinton made the first-ever visit to Africa by a sitting US president in 1998, America's economy was in excellent shape. Having also 'defeated' communism only a few years back, the country's international political

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standing and self-respect were at their highest point. America's crusade for spreading liberal values around the world was also being consolidated at the time. With the country at peace and prosperous, there was little ambiguity as to the propriety of the president paying a 'good will' visit to the forgotten continent and going on safari in Botswana.

The same could not be said about the timing of Prime Minister Mori's visit. In addition to the challenges of the on-going socio-economic restructuring process at home at the time of the visit, virtually all economic indicators were clearly worrisome. Add to this, the decision to cut Overseas Development Aid (ODA), which is considered an 'important pillar of Japan's international contribution', by three per cent for the 2001 fiscal year compared to 2000. Although it was less than the drastic thirty per cent proposed by Shizuka Kamei, Chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party's Policy Research Council, the three per cent cut translated into a substantial reduction in aggregate terms.³

Prime Minister Mori's trip had another paradoxical feature. It was taken for granted by many at the time of his visit that the new Bush administration would have at best a lukewarm attitude towards Africa.⁴ If it were true, as some analysts claim, that Japan by and large follows America's lead in its external relations, the question that arises is then why did Mori decide to take such an initiative when America's reaction would at best be that of indifference, and why now? Could the answer be that Japan had ceased to be the reactive state that it once used to be or, alternatively, was it that there were irresistible reasons that overrode any such concern? It is also important to remember that no one entertained any doubt to the effect that the visit was unlikely to produce immense support at home since, even under normal circumstances, active international diplomacy takes a backseat in Japanese society. This is partly because politicians here seem always mindful of that well-known Japanese expression: *gaiko wa ippyo ni naranai* (diplomatic success would not translate into electoral success.) In a sense, this is where Japanese diplomacy meets Japanese culture. On the Japanese distaste for foreign policy issues, Ichiro Ozawa, the eminent Japanese politician and head of the Liberal Party of Japan, was even more specific and emphatic. In his book, *Blueprint for a New Japan*, he asserted:

"The fact is that, deep down, most Japanese want to be able to avoid that troublesome area called 'foreign relations.' They want to carry on with their peaceful and comfortable lives, and live with their age-old systems, practices and customs without worries about the future. Simply put, Japanese people want the luxury of reacting only when necessary, and want as little participation as possible in international society."⁵

The explanations for the Prime Minister's decision to pay an official visit to Africa at the dawn of the new century are to be found, as we indicated above, in a combination of three factors: continuation of Japan's post-Cold War Africa policy, the leadership style and priorities of Prime Minister Mori and the broader considerations of the nation's vital interests. While these factors do overlap, for analytic purposes we can look at each of them one at a time.

On African issues, Japan has increasingly played a leading role with genuine initiative and independence over the past decade or so. As an ODA donor unsurpassed by any other country for the last ten consecutive years, Japan's assumption of the leadership role in this respect stands to logic.⁶ Before the end of the Cold War, Japan seemed often mindful of the overall geopolitical implication of its economic and political interactions with the Third World. Ideological considerations now having become unimportant, it would make sense for Japan to

go its own way in its external relations. The initiatives to hold the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in 1993 represented both the indication and effect of such a philosophical shift. The holding of TICAD II in 1998 was even more telling. As the late Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi put it in his opening address to the Conference:

"Many countries in Asia, including Japan are in the grip of a severe economic crisis. However, as people say, a friend in need is a friend indeed. This is the spirit with which we approach the challenges of the times, and which indeed underlay TICAD II, and for that reason I believe the holding of this conference is significant."⁷

At the 2000 G8 Okinawa Summit too, Japan took the initiative to invite to Tokyo three African heads of states -Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria and Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria - so as to come up with and reflect the position of the developing world at the Summit. This was, as Prime Minister Mori himself put it in his policy speech in South Africa, "something which had not been attempted before."⁸ In this sense, the Prime Minister's visit marked one significant stage in a process that had been underway for some time.

It is also fair to say that Prime Minister Mori's trip to Africa seemed to reflect his own favorable attitude towards the continent and other developing countries. He might have been exaggerating, but there seems to be a large measure of truth in how Mori himself reasoned out his visit: "I definitely wanted to stand on the soil of the African continent and express directly to the African people the firm determination of the Japanese people to open our hearts along with you, to sweat and expend all our might to aid in the process of Africa overcoming its difficulties and building a bright future."⁹

It can be argued that Mori was the most sympathetic to Africa of any Japanese Prime Minister. In addition to this being the first-ever trip to Africa by a Prime Minister of Japan, his agenda also justified such characterization. Given the various constraints under which he operated, nevertheless, he might not have done as much as he had wished. Skeptics would perhaps point out that if such a judgment were merely based on the excerpts from Prime Minister Mori's speech in Africa, we could not learn much more from them than from any other medium of diplomatic nicety. To some extent, this is generally a valid point and ultimately only the key participants could tell us with authority the context of policy orientations discussed above. But upon hearing repeated positive references to Africa long after the visit was over and in a milieu where the overwhelming majority of the audience tends to be at best indifferent towards African issues, then, one cannot help but reject any doubts about the sincerity of the speeches of the Prime Minister. In his policy speech to the 151st session of the Japanese Diet opened on 31 January 2001, the Prime Minister made repeated sympathetic references to Africa and a positive assessment of his trip to the continent. This was, for instance, what he had to say towards the end of his speech: "I would like to share with you a poem that the children of Africa sang for me:

We are but many drops in one sea
We are but many waves in one ocean

Let us seek out together a path to cooperate
That is the way of life for you and me."¹⁰

In the same speech, the Prime Minister also added that despite the hardship, African children he had seen were full of spirits and hopes.¹¹ To be fair, Mori is not the first Prime Minister of Japan to express his sympathy in generous and most friendly terms. Mori's predecessor, Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi had this to say in 1998:

"...I first came into contact with Africa in the 1960s - the decade of independence on the continent... I went to Kenya, Uganda and other countries in 1963, where I witnessed the overwhelming aspirations of the people for nation building during that period of independence. *What impressed me most as a young lone traveler from Asia, was first of all the genuinely warm hospitality of African people, then their boundless vitality, and the great potential of the continent*" (Italics added).¹²

But considering Mori's unparalleled gesture of goodwill and support for Africa, especially when many others seemed to be looking away, it is tempting even to say, adapting Toni Morrison's phrase, used in the similar metaphoric sense in reference to President Bill Clinton, that Yoshiro Mori was indeed the first black Prime Minister of Japan.¹³ This must be viewed against the background of the Prime Minister's record-breaking unpopularity at home. Towards the end of February 2001, public opinion polls showed that the domestic approval rating of the government Prime Minister Mori had hit 7 per cent. The comparative unpopularity of the Mori government becomes clear if this figure is viewed against that for his successor, Prime Minister Koizumi, who registered a public support rating of 86.3 per cent immediately after he was elected Prime Minister.¹⁴

It needs to be stressed that it would be incorrect to consider the high profile visit and its timing merely as a reflection of the quest for policy continuity and the desire to display one's personal leadership style and unfettered diplomatic initiative. In the final analysis, it would seem that the most important factor was a consideration of the need to ensure Japan's smooth interaction with African nations by reaffirming to their leaders, or at least the most influential among them, that Japan was not abandoning its commitment to assist in the development of the continent. In the words of the Prime Minister himself, through the visit, he wanted "to reiterate Japan's unwavering support to Africa."¹⁵

It is also important to remember that this was not a move based entirely on altruism. In a characteristically ambivalent way, the Prime Minister himself made this point in his speech in South Africa. He said, "Our optimism that people can overcome any difficulty through development of human potential and cooperation between people underpins our stance towards cooperation; *that stance is based not on acts of charity, but on always viewing others at the same eye level and acting as fellow human beings*" (Italics added).¹⁶ Japan wants Africa's raw materials; Africa needs Japan's market, economic aid and investment. Clearly, this does not mean that the two rely on each other to the same extent. The asymmetric nature of interdependence between the two is not only there for all to see but the gap is also widening considerably. For instance, the value of Japan's imports from Africa shrank from US\$ 4017.8 in 1994 to US\$ 3878.8 million in 1998. Similarly, Japan's reliance on imports from Africa fell from 2 per cent of the total values of its imports in 1989 to 1.4 percent in 1998. In 1999, Japanese exports

to sub-Saharan Africa fell 8.3 percent from the year earlier. The decline is partly due to the fall of the prices of primary commodities such as coffee. In the same year, no African country was listed in the category of the top 20 countries from which Japan imports or to which it exports. The reasons for the relative decline in Japan's economic interactions with and general interest in Africa include: 1) the emergence of more business opportunities in Asia, 2) the shift of attention to Eastern Europe, 3) the deepening belief that self-help is the key to development; and 4) the progressively deteriorating economic outlook in Japan itself.¹⁷

Africa's potentially significant vote in the UN General Assembly in support of Japan's permanent membership in a reformed Security Council had probably also been a factor in the Prime Minister's decision to visit Africa, although not the major one, if the words of one senior Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official were to be relied upon. Speaking about the Prime Minister's visit to Africa, the official said, "Forging ties with Africa was not just for collecting votes at the United Nations."¹⁸ If our observation is correct, then it might also have been deemed necessary to convey through the visit the message that the substantial ODA cut did not mean that Japan's interest in helping Africa was now waning. What is also worth noting, however, is that the Prime Minister did not mention the cut in ODA once during his major policy speech in South Africa, although the subject was raised later.¹⁹ What does one make of this? On the surface this appears to refute our hypothesis that Prime Minister Mori's decision to go to Africa was at least in part motivated by a perceived need to convey the message that the ODA cut did not reflect the abandoning of aid for the continent's development efforts. It might be more accurate, however, to surmise that the silence on the subject itself represented a clear message through what the Japanese call *ishin denshin*, a kind of non-verbal communication in which both the sender and the receiver (are expected to) understand the meaning. The silence on ODA in this way could therefore be understood as pinpointing a meeting point of Japanese culture, economics and diplomacy in the context of the visit under discussion.

One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the Prime Minister went to Africa after ODA was cut precisely to re-reiterate Japan's commitment to Africa. It is true that the fact of one event preceding the other in time does not necessarily have to presuppose the existence of a causative link between the two. But, as stated above, it appears reasonably safe to conclude that the timing of the two events - that is, the ODA cut and the visit - do not appear to be totally unrelated.

Thus far, we have sought to address two questions, namely, why the visit was made and the significance of the timing. Now we turn to the question relating to the chosen host countries. Given the competing demands on his time, it is understandable that Prime Minister Mori decided to visit only three African countries out of more than fifty. What we need to ask more specifically is what was the basis on which the Prime Minister selected these countries: South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria. The answer may be that these countries represent Japan's major trading partners in the continent. In 1999, these countries represented the top three trading partners of Japan in the continent. As for the statistical breakdown for this period, the respective values in US \$ million of Japan's exports to South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya were 26,709, 16,252, and 1,633 and the values of Japanese imports in the same period amounted to 24,076, 4394 and 2,773.²⁰ These countries are likewise the major recipients of Japanese aid and

investment in Africa. The selection of the three countries, therefore, indicates that the primary, if not the sole, objective of the visit was economic.

Again, if we compare President Clinton's trip to Africa with that of Prime Minister Mori, the distinctive diplomatic styles and priorities of the two leaders become clear. Undoubtedly, President Clinton's visit to Africa was at least in part motivated by the need to open Africa's markets to American products and thereby assist in the continent's effort for integration into the global economy. The fact that, on returning, he pushed for the passage of the African Growth and Opportunity Act was an indication that the visit's goals had an important economic component. Yet, in Africa itself, the highlight of his visit were not his dialogue on economic cooperation with African leaders, but instead it was his visit to Rwanda, the scene of one of the most horrific genocides in recent history. In the case of Prime Minister Mori's trip to Africa, there was no attempt at window-dressing by including at least one African state that is or was in the lowest position in terms of political or economic well-being of its people.

One may ask what could be made of the Prime Minister's visit to a refugee camp in Kenya, and of the fact that throughout his trip he was accompanied by Dr. Sadako Ogata, the renowned out-going UN Commissioner for Refugees. True, in addition to "increasing the trip's profile,"²¹ Dr. Ogata's company did introduce a "humanitarian" dimension to the Prime Minister's visit. But that is only in a symbolic sense. As for his visit to a refugee camp in Kenya, it should be remembered that Prime Minister Mori chose to visit a refugee camp because he was in Kenya. He did not choose to visit Kenya because it had a refugee camp. If this had been his motive, he could have gone to Ethiopia or the Sudan, the two African countries known for producing more refugees than anything else. But these two countries, unlike Kenya, provide neither the preferred destination of Japanese experts and tourists nor goods and other products in Africa.

If economic calculation was the decisive factor behind the selection of South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, a related question is why the Prime Minister skipped over Angola and Zambia, which are also important sources of critical raw materials for Japan? The answer would be that Angola and Zambia were not passed over. Or not quite. Japanese foreign policy officials seem to have planned carefully to give the leaders of Angola and Zambia the impression that they were being included. After all, risk avoidance or *kiken kaihi*, is one of the key principles in Japanese diplomatic and bargaining actions. Whereas the Prime Minister himself did not go to these countries, the matter had been taken care of in a different way. A month before his visit to South Africa, Prime Minister Mori met Zambia's President Frederick Chiluba in Tokyo after which Japan's International Cooperation Agency (JICA) senior Vice-President reassured Chiluba, that "we have enough intention to cooperate with Zambia because we would like to move from Asia to Africa in cooperation areas."²² As for Angola, according to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs sources, an official working visit by President Jose Eduardo dos Santos was arranged for late January. And Santos's visit did indeed take place.

A discussion of why the Prime Minister skipped over some countries would not be complete without a mention of Ghana. Japan has a high respect for Ghana. The reasons for this include the fact that Ghana has been politically stable in a region where political stability is a rare commodity; that it is democratic, or partially democratic according to some; and that it is the home country of the most high-ranking civil servant in the world, the current Secretary

General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan. Also, Ghana's chocolate seems to be popular among the Japanese youth. Yet, despite the fact that during his visit to South Africa Mori suggested that Ghana would be a Japanese-sponsored research base in Africa "from which cooperation could spread to the rest of Africa", it was not included in the itinerary.²³ The reason for Ghana's exclusion from the Prime Minister's itinerary may simply be that the new President of Ghana, John A. Kufuor, who was sworn in only after Prime Minister Mori began his tour of the continent, was busy putting his new government in place.

The last African country on the Prime Minister's itinerary was Nigeria. If we contrast again Prime Minister Mori's visit with that of President Clinton, one conspicuous difference would be the latter's decision not to visit Nigeria since the country was at the time under the military dictatorship of General Abacha. When Prime Minister Mori visited Nigeria, the country was under the elected leadership of General Olusegun Obasanjo. Given the preeminence of economic calculation in Japanese foreign policy and diplomacy as well as Nigeria's relative importance in this regard, one wonders if Prime Minister Mori would not have gone to Nigeria even if his visit had coincided with General Abacha's rule. This is a purely hypothetical question for which there is no definitive answer. However, experience suggests that he might have. The distinctive diplomatic styles of Japan and the US may also reflect the difference in their respective foreign policy goals.

In closing let us briefly address the direction of Japan-Africa policy in the immediate future. Prime Minister Mori was forced to step down on April 26, 2001, and the new Koizumi government is now installed. Will Japan's policy towards Africa change as a result? The safest answer is that it is too early to tell. However, we could offer some informed speculation in light of experience and early indications. It does not seem likely that Prime Minister Koizumi would pay as much attention to Africa as his predecessor did. One reason has to do with the platform on which he was nominated a prime minister, namely, to focus on domestic political issues and the removal of all barriers to economic recovery. Although voices are beginning to insist that ODA must be immune to structural reform, there are clear indications that the ODA budget could be significantly reduced over the coming years. More specifically, the new Finance Minister, Masajuro Shiokawa, has recently suggested that the ODA budget be cut by 10 per cent for the 2001 fiscal year.²⁴ Therefore, structural reform could be the catalyst for the reduction of ODA to Africa. And as long as the relation between Japan and Africa is generally one of major aid donor and aid recipient, the change could have significant implications for other Japan-Africa relations.

It is true that when he assumed office, Prime Minister Mori had also pledged to affect a fundamental structural reform with a view to speeding up economic recovery. But, unlike Yoshiro Mori, Prime Minister Koizumi seems to have the determination to do what he has said. Therefore, it is likely that Koizumi will continue to show less preoccupation with Africa than his predecessor. The fact that the new prime minister secured his political tenure after his party won the general election in 2001 does not seem to change matters significantly. And some African diplomats in Tokyo have already sensed the new government's less enthusiastic attitude towards Africa and are appealing that "Japan's official development assistance to African countries should not be automatically cut."²⁵ Whether or not such an appeal would be listened to attentively and sympathetically remains to be seen.

Notes

1. This paper was presented at the 2001 Convention of International Studies Association in Hong Kong, July 26-29, 2001.
2. The Japan Times. January 12, 2001. p.18.
3. For a brief discussion on cuts in the ODA budget see Diplomatic Bluebook 1998, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tokyo, 1999. p.96.
4. For analysis of US relations with Africa under the new Bush administration, see Africa Confidential vol. 45, no. 25, December 22, 2000. p. 1-3 as well as Africa Research Bulletin. And Political, Social and Cultural Series vol. 37, no. 12, January 25, 2001. p.14244-14247.
5. Ozawa, I. Blueprint for a New Japan, Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1994. p.41.
6. In 2000, with \$13 billion, Japan has continued its ODA global lead for the 10th consecutive year. The Japan Times. July 22, 2001. p.2.
7. Opening Address by Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi at TICAD II, October 19, 1998. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tokyo. p.3.
8. Speech by Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, "Africa and Japan in the New Century," at Gallagher Estate, Midrand, Republic of South Africa, (Provisional Translation), January 9, 2001. p.1.
9. *ibid.*
10. Prime Minister's Policy Speech. The Japan Times. February 1, 2001. p.6.
11. *ibid.*
12. Opening Address by Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi at TICAD II, October 19, 1998. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tokyo. p.1.
13. Tony Morrison's phrase is mentioned in the article by Hisham Aidi at www.africana.com, February 21, 2001.
14. The Japan Times. February 27, 2001. p.1. And The Japan Times. 29 April 2001. p.1.
15. Speech by Prime Minister Yoshihiro Mori, "Africa and Japan in the New Century," at Gallagher Estate, Midrand, Republic of South Africa, (Provisional Translation), January 9, 2001. p.3.
16. *ibid.*
17. The sources consulted are International Trade Statistics Yearbook 1998. United Nations, New York, 1999. p 504; JETRO White Paper on International Trade 2000, Tokyo; Asahi Shimbun Japan Almanac 2001; and my own interview with Kensuke Yoshida, Deputy Director Second Africa Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tokyo, February 17, 1997.
18. The Japan Times. January 6 2001. p.3. And the editorial on The Japan Times, 12 January 2001. p.18.
19. Asahi Shimbun. January 14, 2001. And Yomiuri Shimbun. January 14, 2001.
20. The Europa Year Book 1999, vol. 1 and 2. London: Europa Publications Ltd., 1999. And JETRO White Paper on International Trade 2000, Tokyo.
21. The Japan Times. January 6, 2001. p.3.
22. Times of Zambia. December 9, 2000. p.1.

23. Associated Press. January 9, 2001. p.1.
24. The Japan Times. July 22, 2001. p.2.
25. The Japan Times. July 5, 2001. p.2.

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