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Japan and China in Africa: Allies, Partners or Adversaries?¹

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1 This paper is based on a public lecture given on January 18, 2018 by Seifudein Adem as the 2017/2018 Africa's Asian Options Fellow at Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany. It also draws on his previous works.

Introduction

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi made overlapping visits to Africa in January 2014. The visits took place, perhaps also not accidentally, on the heels of a steadily deteriorating relationship between the two countries. At times the visits themselves descended into a verbal combat over who has Africa's best interest at heart. In May 2014, Mr. Li Keqiang, China's Premier, too, was in Africa. In December 2015, China's President Xi Jinping arrived in Johannesburg, South Africa, for consultations with Africa's leaders about Africa's economic development. Eight months later, in August 2016, Japan's Prime Minister Abe, too, arrived in Nairobi, Kenya, also for the same reason. In the background, Chinese and Japanese diplomats argued, again, over who has Africa's interest at heart.

In general, Sino-Japanese diplomacy in Africa between 2014 and 2016 was not just less harmonious but it was also characterized by intense hostility. This is not an unfair characterization, especially considering the harsh words exchanged by the diplomats of the two countries during the aforementioned visits. Compared to the years between 2014 and 2016, the signals coming from Sino-Japanese diplomacy in 2017 in Africa were mixed. Both China and Japan toned down their rhetoric towards each other, but, on balance, Japan seemed keener to cooperate with and was more conciliatory toward China than the other way round. But what was it that positively impacted aspects of Sino-Japanese diplomatic behavior in 2017? At least two events seemed to have become profoundly relevant. One was the fact that both Xi Jinping and Shinzo Abe consolidated their power after, respectively, the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and the General Election in Japan. Incidentally, both events took place in October. The other factor which possibly led to the relaxation of the bilateral tension between China and Japan – to some extent at least, on the part of Japan – was the ambiguity in the Trump administration's commitment to the US-Japan alliance.

We shall concern ourselves in this paper with Sino-Japanese rivalry as it has been unfolding in Africa. We do so in order to discern the factors which have helped to guide and influence their diplomatic behavior in Africa. But we begin with a brief historical background as to how the two countries responded to the dilemmas of modernization. Then, we take a closer look at developmental states in Japan and China, because, ultimately, Sino-Japanese diplomacy in Africa will have to involve the question of whose developmental experience is more relevant for Africa's own development. We will then focus on the comparative history of Sino-Japanese diplomacy in Africa and its contemporary expressions before we proceed to outline some of the elements of divergence and convergence in it. We shall subsequently link up the discussion with how Africa ought to respond under the circumstances to maximize its autonomy and reap optimum benefit from its relationship with the two Asian powers.

I. Sino-Japanese Contact with the West

In the middle of the 19th century it was China rather than Japan which appeared to have met the major preconditions of industrialization, including its larger size, its less stratified society, its less constrained merchant class and its more abundant natural resources. Japan, a small island with limited resources, was a more hierarchical society that was also insular and xenophobic.

So why did Japan succeed in modernizing its society before China? The explanation must lie in their divergent responses to the dilemma of modernization after they came into contact with the West. The issue particularly pertains to the level of receptivity to foreign ideas and institutions.

The Japanese are often said to borrow ideas and institutions from others. J. Tobin was undoubtedly dramatizing it to some extent but there is an important element of truth when he observed: “[T]he Japanese, unable or unwilling to create, borrow. The genius of the Japanese lies not in invention but in adaptation – of Korean pottery, tombs and textiles; Chinese script and scripture; Dutch science and medicine; French education; English colonialism; German militarism; and American egalitarianism, corporate efficiency and popular culture.”²

It is also true, however, that the Japanese modified imported ideas and institutions, ranging from Confucianism to capitalism, and adapted them to local conditions without much concern about whether the end product had or did not have close resemblance to the original. Japanese Confucianism, it is said for instance, is neither Japanese nor Confucian.³ Alternatively, one can also perhaps say that Japanese Confucianism is more Japanese than Confucian.

Upon initial encounter with the technological might of the West, the Japanese saw how the West was far more advanced in science and technology than they were and asked the question: can we modernize technologically without westernizing culturally? Their answer was “yes”. Japan was thus quick to respond positively to the innovative side of the contact with the West. Like the Japanese, the Chinese also saw and somewhat appreciated how the West was technically more advanced than they were, also at about the same time, and asked themselves: could we modernize like the West without ceasing to be Chinese? Chinese believed that to modernize along Western lines was to cease to be Chinese. And, so, their answer was “no”. The Chinese said to themselves that they would not imitate the West. After all, they reasoned, China is one of the oldest civilizations, it has 4000 years of recorded history, and its share of world GDP had been larger than that of any Western society for eighteen centuries out of the last twenty centuries.

Since more than a thousand years ago, Japan had also borrowed from China’s culture, including via Buddhism and Confucianism. What this also meant was, on the one hand, Japan had less inhibitions about borrowing from the West, especially in the field of science and technology, and adapting them for its purpose. As Ali Mazrui put it: “The idea of borrowing and adapting foreign culture was not new to Japan. The Japanese had responded to the Chinese influence earlier in their history in a way which was basically repeated at the time of Japan’s response to the West. The slogan in the confrontation with the West was, quite simply, ‘Western technique and Japanese spirit’.”⁴

2 Tobin (1992: 3).

3 Eisenstadt (1996: 175-190).

4 Mazrui and Adem (2013: 23).

On the other hand, China saw itself as the Central Kingdom – the center and source of human civilization. Such a belief system, which is not without some merit, nevertheless constrained the Chinese from objectively evaluating the technological progress made in the West at least since the Industrial Revolution. In other words, China was slow to respond to the innovative side of the contact with the West. In short, Japan embraced the West; China rejected it.

More than a hundred years after its encounter with the West, China is now certainly borrowing heavily, from the East and from the West. Just as Japan and China reacted each in its own way to contacts with the West, the time has now come also for Africa to react not only to the sustained contacts with China and Japan but also to the rivalry between them. The question which arises is: what are the options available to Africa under the circumstances? What are Africa's Asian options? But first we need to review the historical antecedent and contemporary manifestations of Sino-Japanese diplomacy in Africa from a comparative perspective.

II. Developmental States in Japan and China

Our objective in this section is to demonstrate why, in the first place, Japan and China have been described as developmental states. This question is relevant for a fuller understanding of the complexity of Africa's Asian options.

A. Japan as a Developmental State

Chalmers Johnson coined the concept of developmental state and systematically elaborated it in the context of Japan's industrial success after the Second World War.⁵ More specifically, Johnson identified four distinguishing features of a developmental state, namely: a) the existence of a small, inexpensive, but elite state bureaucracy staffed by the best managerial talent available in the system; b) a political system in which the bureaucracy is given sufficient scope to take initiative and operate effectively; c) the perfection of market-conforming methods of state intervention in the economy; and d) a pilot organization like Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry. Some of the functions of the developmental state are: altering market incentives, reducing risks, offering entrepreneurial visions, and managing conflicts. In Johnson's view, what made Japan a developmental state was the fact that it effectively used such a powerful, competent and insulated bureaucracy to orchestrate a successful modernization. The conscious policies of the Japanese state made the industrial miracle possible. In short, Johnson's developmental state is based upon a powerful, competent and insulated bureaucracy.⁶

It is also important to note that there are more self-styled developmental states today which are authoritarian in their orientation. In reality, however, some of them are more authoritarian than developmental. On this, Johnson had argued: "[in a developmental state] then

5 Johnson (1982; 1999).

6 Johnson (1999: 38-39); Johnson (1982: 48).

bureaucratic rulers possess a particular kind of legitimacy that allows them to be much more experimental and undocinaire than in the typical authoritarian regime;” and “the leaders of the developmental state do enjoy legitimacy in the sense that their claim to political power is based on some source of authority above and beyond themselves. They differ in this sense from authoritarian rulers whose continued rule depends on their monopoly of force”.⁷ In other words, unlike developmental states, authoritarian states enjoy very little legitimacy which is beyond and above their own perpetuation.

After Johnson, many scholars have further deepened our understanding of what constitutes a developmental state. For instance, L. Weiss has reduced the characteristics of a developmental state to the following elements: a) transformative goals, b) a relatively insulated pilot agency and a competent bureaucracy in charge of that transformative project and c) institutionalized government-business cooperation.⁸ Clearly, Weiss’s definition of the developmental state is based on the core ideas formulated by Chalmers Johnson. S. Hayashi’s own definition of the developmental state model, too, has a close affinity with Johnson’s. For Hayashi, the developmental state model is constituted by: “a state-led industrialization, in which the state, not the market, assumes a central role in mobilizing economic resources and initiating industrialization.”⁹

B. China as a Developmental State

It is sometimes said that China is a developmental state with “Chinese characteristics”. China is for sure not unique in this since the Newly Industrializing Countries of East and Southeast Asia, too, were developmental states, with their own specific characteristics. And so was Japan, a developmental state with “Japanese characteristics”. What has been happening in China in the last few decades was simply a new application of state-led, state-coordinated, or state guided capitalism.¹⁰

To some analysts, however, how China’s economy is organized and how it operates resembles the command economy of the former Soviet Union rather than the developmental state which emerged in postwar Japan and spread to East and Southeast Asia.¹¹

To others, what makes China’s developmental state unique is the fact that it “combines top-down state-led development with bottom-up entrepreneurial private capital accumulation.”¹² Still others see gradualism and experimentation, among other things, as unique features of China’s developmental state.¹³ What Suisheng Zhao described as the characteristics of the China Model could as well be taken as the characteristics of China’s developmental state.

First, China’s modernization is driven not by any ideological doctrine or principles but by pragmatism, vividly expressed by the famous Chinese saying, ‘a cat, whether it is white or black, is a good one as long as it is able to catch mice.’ *Second*, China’s modernization is led by a strong and pro-developmental state, capable of shaping national consensus and ensuring overall political and macroeconomic stability in which to pursue wide-ranging reforms.

7 Johnson (1999: 52-53).

8 Quoted in Hayashi (2010: 50).

9 Hayashi (2010: 47).

10 McNally (2012: 750).

11 For instance, see Hayashi (2010: 49).

12 McNally (2012: 744).

13 See Breslin (2011: 1330); and Vogel (2011: 377-476).

Third, China's approach toward modernization has involved elective learning from the liberal Western models, including the American model.¹⁴

To put it in another way, China's developmental state exhibits features which stem from the interplay of national and historical attributes of the country and the mode of political and economic organization it adopted. Indeed, it is the unique set of domestic, regional and international factors which gave rise to the distinctive features of the developmental state in China (as well as Japan).¹⁵

III. Sino-Japanese Rivalry in Africa

"Japan will not just extract resources from Africa but create jobs."¹⁶ This statement, made by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan in Maputo, Mozambique, in January 2014, suggested at least two things. First, China was soaking up Africa's resources, and, second, Chinese workers were taking away from Africans the jobs Africans need and deserve. The Japanese daily newspaper, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, elaborated further: "Many Chinese companies import workers from China to work in Africa – a practice that does not help in increasing local employment".¹⁷ In his statement, Prime Minister Abe was touching on a legitimate but sensitive issue in China's economic diplomacy in Africa. On their part, China's leaders also launched what could be simply regarded as diplomatic offensive. The spokesperson of China's Foreign Ministry, Hong Lei, thus retorted: "Japan claims to boost employment in Africa, but how do you do that if there is no industry to support? We will wait and see how far the aid program Abe promised will go".¹⁸ The reaction of China's Ambassador to Ethiopia sounded more offensive than diplomatic. He said: "Abe has become the biggest troublemaker in Asia and his visit to Africa was part and parcel of China containment policy."¹⁹ Subsequently, *The Japan Times* reported: "The Chinese disdain for [Prime Minister] Abe's visit [in Ethiopia] went past the political level. On Sunday, Chinese activists brawled with Japanese embassy security in the capital of Ethiopia, as they took pictures of the embassy and protested Abe's visit."²⁰

What all this meant was that in early 2014 there was clearly an unfolding rivalry between Japan and China in Africa. We can go further and hypothesize that the rivalry was triggered by the anxiety caused in Japan by the growing power and influence of China in Africa and around the world. An alternative way of putting forward the same hypothesis is to say, quite simply, that Prime Minister Abe's visit to Africa in January 2014 was a response to the general sense of insecurity which then prevailed in Japan. But, ultimately, the bilateral tension was rooted in the deep disagreement between the two countries over history and territory.

Before we scrutinize Prime Minister Abe's visit more closely, let us offer a perspective on the historical evolution of China's and Japan's diplomacy in Africa. It must be stated from the outset that practical men and women, in this case diplomats, seldom formulate conceptual

14 Suisheng Zhao (2010: 423-424).

15 Naughton (2010: 459).

16 Kantei (2014).

17 *The Yomiuri Shimbun* 15th January 2014.

18 Quoted in Zhendong and Jian (2014).

19 *The Bangkok Post*, 15th January 2014.

20 *The Japan Times*, 16th January 2014.

categories before they implement their foreign policy priorities. It is up to scholars who study the diplomatic practices to discern and formulate a coherent body of thought behind those practices. It should therefore not come as a surprise to anyone if the conceptual framework laid down below does not perfectly correspond to how Chinese and Japanese diplomats sought to represent their diplomacy in Africa.

A. Comparative Diplomacy

China and Africa

There have been at least five distinct phases in the history of China's diplomacy in Africa. With an emphasis on ideology, the first phase (1955-1978) began in Bandung (Indonesia) at the conference of Afro-Asian countries. Subsequently, China supported national liberation movements in Africa and, then, forged relations with independent African countries so long as those countries were not close friends of the US; later, the ideological litmus test became the Soviet Union. This phase of China's diplomacy was also conducted in the shadow of Mao's ideologically-inspired experiments at home, including the Hundred Flowers Experiment (1956), the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and the Cultural Revolution (1965-1967). After Mao's death in 1976, the role of ideology in China's diplomacy and domestic politics waned, running its course around 1978.

Deng Xiaoping's "Four Modernizations" heralded the beginning of the second phase of China's diplomacy in Africa (1979-1989). This phase also coincided with the end of Africa's liberation project, except for Southern Africa. Ideology ceased to be a major consideration. China thus forged relations with countries like Zimbabwe, Angola and Ivory Coast, too. The Tiananmen incident in 1989 sealed the end of this phase of China's diplomacy in Africa. The incident brought China and many African countries closer even as it led for a while to China's global isolation.

The third phase (1990-2000) of China's diplomacy in Africa was marked by the end of the Cold War globally and the triumph of market socialism in China. On the part of China, there was a sharp focus on Africa's natural resources that were critical for fueling the country's rapid economic growth. This phase also saw the acceleration of multi-dimensional and multi-layered economic interactions between China and Africa. China's trade with African countries grew rapidly in this period; and their diplomatic interactions also intensified.

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation was established in 2000, heralding that China's diplomacy in Africa had entered its fourth phase (2000-2016), one that exhibited greater institutionalization, further expansion of China's interests and the multiplication of Chinese actors in Africa.

China has been keen on integrating its Africa policy into its grand Eurasian strategy of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a concept which was clarified at the BRI Forum held in Beijing in May 2017. The question which has now arisen is whether we are witnessing the beginning of a new phase in Sino-African diplomacy.

Japan and Africa

Japan's diplomacy in Africa, which began in 1961 when the Africa Division was created in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has passed through five phases, too.

In the first phase (1961-1972), Japan seriously took upon itself the role of supporter of America, vowing to curb the spread of Communism in Africa by ensuring its diplomacy was in lockstep with America's overall Cold War strategy. This phase came to an end in 1973 when the Organization of Petroleum Producing Countries (OPEC) decided to raise the price of oil.

One effect of the OPEC decision was to usher in the second phase of Japan's Africa diplomacy (1973-1992) in which the nation realized more than ever before that it must diversify sources of energy and other raw materials critical to its industries. In this vein, Japan paid attention to Africa, too, sending its Foreign Minister (Toshio Kimura) for the first time to visit the continent in 1974.²¹

In the third phase (1993-2006), Japan showed greater independence more than ever before in its Africa diplomacy.²² It took certain initiatives, such as the launching of the Tokyo International Conference on African Development. It also became a leading Official Development Assistance (ODA) donor. Japan's diplomacy in Africa and elsewhere in this period reflected the nation's international status as well as its global aspirations. The first-ever visit to Africa by a Japanese Prime Minister took place when Yoshiro Mori visited Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria in 2001. Prime Minister Mori's successor, Junichiro Koizumi, visited Ghana and Ethiopia in 2006.

In its fourth phase (2007-2013), Japan's diplomacy in Africa looked less vigorous, coinciding as it did with drastic changes in the conditions which had inspired a vibrant diplomacy in the preceding phase. China became the largest trading partner of Japan in 2008 and of Africa in 2009. In 2010, China overtook Japan as the second largest economy globally. No Japanese prime minister visited Africa in this period – not even Mr. Taro Aso who had an African experience as he had lived in Sierra Leone for two years when he was younger.²³

The fifth phase in Japan's diplomacy began with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Africa in January 2014 and was partly a reaction to the growing influence of China in Africa and beyond, even though the precipitating or proximate cause was Japan's desire to gain access to Africa's resources, specially natural gas, in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear accident. The Indo-Japanese idea of Asia-Africa Growth Corridor which was launched in 2017 could be seen as an extension of the fifth phase in Japan's diplomatic effort in Africa. Let us now look more closely at the dynamics of Sino-Japanese rivalry in Africa as it played out when Shinzo Abe visited Africa in 2014.

B. Shinzo Abe in Africa

On 9th January 2014, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan left Tokyo on a three-nation Africa tour that took him to Ivory Coast, Mozambique and Ethiopia. The visit was not unexpected, since he had earlier indicated that he looked forward to visiting Africa "at the earliest possible time".²⁴ But the visit was still intriguing for the following reasons.

21 Ochiai (2001: 39).

22 Adem (2001); Cornelissen (2012).

23 Aso (2007: 251-253).

24 Kantei (2014).

First, none of the countries the Prime Minister visited were among the most important today in terms of Japan's economic interest in Africa – as sources of its imports and/or destinations of its exports. Another reason had to do with the fact, as indicated above, that this was the first Japanese prime ministerial visit to Africa since 2006. Why did it take so long for a Japanese prime minister to visit Africa? And what inspired Prime Minister Abe to do so in 2014? And, third, the visit took place when many observers believed that Japan would singularly focus on domestic recovery after Fukushima, the large-scale disaster which befell the nation in March 2011. Did Prime Minister Abe visit Africa in 2014 in spite of Fukushima, or because of it?

In short, why did Prime Minister Abe visit Africa? Why did he do so in 2014, and not in 2007 when he was also the Prime Minister of Japan? Do the answers to these questions in any way pertain to the unfolding Sino-Japanese rivalry?

Let us first consider why Prime Minister Abe went to Mozambique, Ivory Coast and Ethiopia. Japan had long sought to diversify the sources of liquefied natural gas which it had been importing, like China, mainly from Australia and Qatar. There was an added urgency in this regard after the Fukushima nuclear meltdown in 2011, as the disaster heightened anti-nuclear sentiments in Japan. In the first week of July 2014, Japan's 48 nuclear reactors which had supplied 30% of electricity generated in Japan, were all offline awaiting safety standard tests.²⁵ Reduced electricity from nuclear power meant an increased demand for importation of natural gas as well as for new sources. Prime Minister Abe decided to visit Mozambique because of the recent discovery of huge natural gas reserves in that country. Moreover, Japan imports rare earth metal from China. In addition to natural gas, Mozambique, too, has this critical raw material.²⁶ After announcing a substantial aid/investment package in Maputo in January 2014, Prime Minister Abe thus said quite candidly: "our assistance is aimed at securing access to the vast mineral resources of Mozambique".²⁷

If Prime Minister Abe visited Mozambique for natural resources, he visited Ivory Coast for diplomatic reason. Ivory Coast was the leader of the Economic Community of West African States in January 2014, with its president, Alassane Quattara, serving as its Chairperson. By visiting Ivory Coast, Prime Minister Abe sought to reach out to as wide a West African audience as he could, since it was more logical to invite West African leaders to Ivory Coast in this context, which he did, than go to each of their countries in the region.

The same diplomatic imperative that took Prime Minister Abe to Ivory Coast took him to Ethiopia. It was easier to address Africa from Addis Ababa, the seat of the African Union (AU), especially when Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Haile Mariam Desalegn, was also the Chair of the AU. Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa, with a potentially huge market. Furthermore, Ethiopia had the longest-running bilateral relations with Japan in sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, early 20th century rulers of Ethiopia had portrayed the country as a Tokugawa Japan.²⁸

What about the timing of Abe's visit to Africa? Why did he visit Africa in January 2014 rather than when he was the Prime Minister of Japan from 2006 to 2007? Is this a tale of two Abes, or is there something particularly significant about January 2014? The answer, as elaborated below, would have to be both of the above.

25 Iwata (2014).

26 Bradsher (2010).

27 Kantei (2014).

28 Mazrui and Adem (2013: 39-40).

The first administration of Shinzo Abe (2006-2007) was quite different from the second (2012-) with regard, for instance, to policies towards China. The former appeared more pragmatic. In fact, China was the first destination of Prime Minister Abe's international visit in 2006. The second Abe administration appeared less pragmatic towards China.²⁹ The rapid rise of China was seen as a unique development by the second Abe administration to justify a special response in 2014.

On another level of abstraction, there were at least four overlapping schools of thought about Prime Minister Abe's visit to Africa in January 2014. The first school viewed the visit as a strategy of the Abe administration trying to contain China's expanding influence in Africa and elsewhere. For the second school, it was an attempt on the part of Japan to engage China by trying to make it clear that China's behavior in Asia could affect its interests in Africa. The third school viewed Japan's ambition in Africa as more limited but urgent, with its principal focus on gaining access to Africa's resources. The fourth school considered Japan's interests in Africa as merely diplomatic, limited only to garnering support for its candidacy for permanent membership in a reformed UN Security Council, among its other international ventures.

One does not have to subscribe to the "containment" school in order to contend that it was the growing power of China in Africa (and elsewhere) and the uneasiness it caused in Japan that partly conditioned the timing of Prime Minister Abe's visit to Africa in January 2014. With more than USD 198 billion, China-Africa trade hit an all-time high in 2013, which was more than 7 times the value of Japan's trade with Africa in the same period. While Africa's imports from China grew from 2% in 1995 to 13% in 2012, Africa's imports from Japan fell from around 7% in 1995 to 3% in 2012.³⁰ In 2014, 13.5% of Africa's trade was with China; the comparative figure for Japan was only 2.5%.³¹

China has also bolstered its growing economic interactions in Africa, with a potentially formidable soft power, by mobilizing its cultural resources and opening multiple channels of public diplomacy with governments and peoples of Africa. In 2012, Xinhua, China's state news agency, had 23 bureaus in Africa.³² This was apart from the fact that China had built 31 Confucius Institutes in 26 African countries in the same period.³³ In 2010, NHK, the Japanese equivalent of Xinhua, had only one news bureau in Africa, and that was in Egypt. The Japanese daily newspaper, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, thus sounded the alarm in 2013: "Japan must be cautious about China's moves on the African continent, where it is stepping up its presence. We cannot ignore China's policy towards Africa, which is noticeably aimed at monopolizing natural resources there while focusing only on China's interest."³⁴

And yet the prevailing sentiment among Japan's business leaders even then seemed that Africa was not yet ready for Japanese economic involvement in a major way. That was, for instance, what one study concluded – 98.2% of 110 Japanese firms doing business in Japan indicated "political and social instability" was still a major problem in Africa.³⁵ However, a broad consensus was also emerging that Japan had to make a move without much delay. "If you wait until the security situation fully improves across Africa," a Japanese government official reportedly

29 Swanstrom and Kokubun (2013); Warren (2013: 175-187).

30 JICA (2013: 4); Hanauer and Morris (2014: 26).

31 Fabricius (2014: 1).

32 Jacobs (2012: A 18).

33 Hanauer and Morris (2014: 78).

34 *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2013.

35 JETRO (2013).

said, “there will be no market left for you”.³⁶ But the business community in Japan was not swayed as Japanese investment in Africa declined from USD 17 billion in 2014 to USD 14 billion in 2015.³⁷

The second factor behind the timing of Prime Minister Abe’s visit to Africa in January 2014 was “Abenomics”, his policy that was designed to restore vitality to Japan’s economy by ending its long economic slump through fiscal stimuli (such as public works packages), structural reform (such as free trade agreements) and monetary policy (such as manipulation of interest rates). Abe’s experiment had been reasonably successful so far, as it had made possible the growth of Japan’s GDP for many quarters in a row.³⁸ Needless to say, stable supply of energy sources, preferably from diverse places, was needed to ensure the sustainability of Abenomics.

Third, as we have already suggested, Prime Minister Abe has been arguably the most assertive leader in postwar Japan when it comes to his country’s diplomatic approach towards China.³⁹ In January 2014, Abe traveled to Ivory Coast, Mozambique and Ethiopia amid tensions which arose between his country and China over disputed islands in the East China Sea, as well as over his visit to the Yakusuni Shrine in Tokyo. The visit also took place when China’s Foreign Minister, Mr. Wang Yi, was visiting some of the same African countries. Indeed, Prime Minister Abe had openly advocated a more “muscular foreign policy” towards China.⁴⁰ It is therefore conceivable that the overall approach of the second Abe Administration towards China was another impetus behind the timing of the visit to Africa in January 2014.

If China and Japan are now ready to compete in this way not only for raw materials and markets but also for respect and love in Africa, what is the proper African response? I believe an African response should be informed by an acute awareness of the complexity of the major elements of divergence and convergence between China’s and Japan’s diplomacy in Africa. It is to this subject that we must now turn.

C. Elements of Divergence in Sino-Japanese Diplomacy in Africa

We can identify at least six elements of divergence in the diplomacy of China and Japan in Africa. The first relates to the perception in Africa that China pays greater attention to more African countries, and that it does so sometimes irrespective of the immediate benefit to itself.⁴¹ Conversely, Japan is said to follow the “key-country” approach in which a country is singled out in a specific African region and used as a diplomatic springboard in and beyond that region.⁴² In reality, however, China’s African diplomacy is not as indiscriminate as it appears. On closer inspection, we would learn that the bulk of China’s economic interactions in Africa, too, are concentrated in a handful of African countries in different regions of the continent as are Japan’s. Because of its immense appetite for natural resources, however, China is interested in very poor countries in Africa, too, as long as they possess resources useful to China, even if these resources are not yet fully developed. This idea gained currency especially after the invention of the mode of international economic transaction known as “infrastructure for natural resources”.

36 Quoted in Obe (2014).

37 John Aglionby and Leo Lewis, “Japan Looks to Boost Trade with Africa,” *Financial Times*, 26 August 2016. [Online.]

38 Baker and Schlesinger (2014).

39 See, for instance, Abe (2010).

40 Baker and Schlesinger (2014: A. 7).

41 Adem (2010). Also see Seifudein Adem, “Five ways China can be a friend to Africa as its footprints grows,” *South China Morning Post*, 29 November 2017. [Online.]

42 Morikawa (1997: 22-24).

The second element relates to the perception that Japan's economic aid is often geared towards promoting what may be called neutral freedom as opposed to China's aid which is concerned with positive freedom. Neutral freedom gives one the abstract freedom to choose whereas positive freedom gives one the concrete power to do so. The president of China's Exim Bank was tapping into this distinction when he said: "Roads and radios are more urgent needs for Africans than human rights and freedom."⁴³ In the specific context of the unfolding Sino-Japanese rivalry, Lu Shaye, Head of African Department at China's Foreign Ministry, was echoing a similar sentiment when he described Japan's approach as "empty words whereas Chinese assistance 'can be seen and touched'."⁴⁴

Third, even though the economic exchanges of China and Japan with Africa are asymmetric, favoring the Asian powers by virtue of the size and nature of their national economies, the two countries use divergent approaches for dealing with issues arising from trade imbalance with African countries. Japan generally prefers to extend ODA and use debt cancellation while China encourages exports from African countries to China through reduction or elimination of trade barriers.

It is widely believed that while Japan's economic aid to Africa has historically sought to promote the so-called "Washington Consensus", China's economic engagement with Africa challenges this very "consensus". There was also an emerging discourse about the so-called the "Beijing Consensus".⁴⁵ This is the fourth element of divergence which simply (and somewhat simplistically) is said to reflect the dichotomy between the "free market" economy of Japan and the "state-guided" development of China. In any case, upon closer inspection, again, we learn the difference between China and Japan in this area, too, is far-less clear cut.

The fifth element exists in the realm of cultural diplomacy. As we indicated above, China has already built more language schools in Africa in the last ten years than Japan did in the last half century. This is also where the issue of comparative diasporization becomes relevant. The Chinese diaspora on the African continent is growing. Japan has virtually none. As Chinese immigrants become more integrated into African societies, it will not also be very long before they start to speak African languages. Although the lack of comparative achievement in this regard on the part of Japan indicates, at one level, the divergence of its approach from China's, at another level, the issue also points to an area of potential convergence of interests between the two Asian countries. That is to say that both China and Japan face a special challenge in Africa due to the fact that neither Chinese nor Japanese is widely spoken in the continent. This is a distinct disadvantage both for China and for Japan compared to the other major powers with which Africa had had historical relations.

The sixth element of divergence pertains to the key players in Africa, which in the case of Japan are corporations and diplomats. In China's case, the multiple actors range from the state, semi-private enterprises and private companies to municipal governments and even retail traders. And this fact has given Japan's diplomacy in Africa the appearance of greater cohesiveness than China's. The multiplicity of Chinese actors in Africa has also created ample opportunities for potential conflicts among the objectives of these actors.⁴⁶

43 Quoted in Jakobson (2009: 425).

44 Quoted in Feng (2014).

45 Kennedy (2010: 461-477); Zhao (2010: 419-436); Ampiah and Naidu (2008: 333).

46 For instance, see Cheng Cheng, "Chinese firms must take longer-term view of Africa," *Global Times*, 3 December 2017. [Online.]

D. Elements of Convergence in Sino-Japanese Diplomacy in Africa

We can identify at least six elements of convergence in China's and Japan's diplomacy in Africa. First, the role of the state is relatively strong in both China and Japan. This is partly why the two countries are described as developmental states.⁴⁷ There is probably less difference between them on how the state should relate to the economy than between either of them and the United States. And yet we ought not to stretch the similarities between China and Japan in this regard too far, since China's developmental state owes more to the heritage of its Maoist ideology than anything else. Japan's developmentalism is based upon a different ideology, or ideologies.

Second, the tendency to creatively combine big business and diplomacy is another feature which China and Japan share when it comes to their relations with Africa. Unlike Japan-Africa relations where the scale of economic interactions has been limited, however, China-Africa relations are becoming more complex, more expansive and more consequential. As indicated above, the same phenomena have also made the relationship more sensitive to tensions between China's business and diplomatic interests in the continent.

Third, Japan and China have variously used public diplomacy to connect with Africa's populace.⁴⁸ Two recent examples will illustrate this point. When he visited Ethiopia in January 2014, Prime Minister Abe told Ethiopians in reference to Ethiopia's legendary Marathon runner Abebe Bikila who won a gold medal at the Tokyo Olympics in 1964: "My name is Abe, but everybody teased me at school, calling me Abebe. Many Japanese Marathon runners would collapse after the race but when I saw Mr. Abebe actually stretching afterwards, it was such a surprise, even for a 10-year-old".⁴⁹ When Prime Minister Li Keqiang visited Ethiopia in May 2014, he also made sure to let his host know that the current Ethiopian President, Dr. Mulatu Teshome, and he were studying at Beijing University in the 1970s – at the same time.⁵⁰ As simple and human as the above two stories are, they also go a long way in creating deeper connections among peoples.

The fourth element of convergence has to do with the overlapping nature of the interests of China and Japan in Africa. Given the dependence of the two countries on imports of mineral fuel and other critical raw materials (such as oil in the case of China and platinum in the case of Japan) and in their quest for markets and diplomatic support, Africa could, theoretically, become an arena of cooperation rather than conflict between them. Of course, the same phenomena could provide a fertile ground for conflict between the two countries.

But, on balance, there is at least one reason which pushes Japan and China towards cooperation rather than conflict in Africa with greater mutual benefit for China, for Japan and for Africa. This is the fact that Japanese leaders often refer to the consolidation of Sino-African relations to underscore the need on their part to strengthen the relationship with Africa. In other words, relations between Japan and Africa may be enhanced because of China's greater involvement in Africa, not in spite of it. But this effect cuts both ways. China, too, had been active in adapting some of Japan's diplomatic initiatives for its purposes in Africa.

47 Beeson (2009: 5-39).

48 Adem (2001; 2013).

49 Quoted in *The Australian Network News*, 2014.

50 CCTV 7th May 2014.

Fifth, Japan, like China, has been less predisposed in the last half century to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. The sources of such restraint on the part of Japan and China are, of course, different. Japan's principle of non-interference is based on its constitution that has imposed considerable constraints on foreign activities of the nation after World War II whereas China's restraint is rooted, at least officially, in the fact that it was itself the victim of external intervention.

The final point of convergence is in the realm of aid diplomacy. There is evidence to suggest a connection between Japan's aid diplomacy in China and China's aid diplomacy in Africa.⁵¹ The similarities include the focus on infrastructure and the relatively small size of the grant element in their economic assistance or aid. If so, this means that China's economic diplomacy in Africa is not as far apart from Japan's as it is sometimes assumed to be.

E. Africa's Response to Sino-Japanese Competition in Africa

In the light of the above analysis, the question emerges: how should Africa respond to Sino-Japanese rivalry in Africa? I would like to suggest that at least five strategies are available for Africa's consideration. First, African countries must be prepared to resist the temptation to deal with China and Japan on a bilateral basis alone; they must be prepared to use collectively their producer power, their consumer power and even their debtor power, to induce both China and Japan to make significant concessions. If China, with its 1.4 billion people, could speak in one voice, why could Africa, with its 1.2 billion people, not do so, even after allowing for the uniqueness of Africa's historical experiences? Africa's collective voice will help it make up for the immense variations in power among African countries themselves.

Particularly urgent, second, is a much-delayed strategy of intra-African economic linkages at both regional and continental levels. Of course, the idea about the need for increased mutual dependence among African economies is not new – it has been advocated for many decades. But little was achieved in practice. In 2013, only 10% of African countries traded with each other, compared to 40% in North America and 63% in Western Europe.⁵² We must, of course, also accept the supposition that the structural constraints which are rooted in the nature of African states and their economies make regional economic integration more difficult and/or less meaningful for the time being.

Also vital is the third strategy of diversification. Africa should forge better relations with multiple powers. As China turned its attention to Africa, with significant investment and opportunities for trade, there is a tendency to see China as the savior of Africa, and to care much less, if at all, about the need to attract other powers, too. Diversification also means it is less useful to rely on a singular ideology, whether it is developmentalism or neoliberalism. Finally, Africa should invite in multiple extra-regional powers not only to counter China and Japan but also to let them counter each other. In this respect, Africa would do well to learn from the experience of Southeast Asian countries.⁵³

The fourth strategy requires that African countries pursue diplomatic pragmatism. Europe has often criticized China for dealing with African states which are known – or suspected – to be systematic violators of human rights. China itself has occasionally been the target of sharp European criticism for its treatment of certain individuals or groups within its own borders.

51 Brautigam (2011: 24); Feng (2005: 202-223).

52 Hanauer and Morris (2014: 14).

53 Adem (2018: 72-85).

At the same time, economic relations between Europe and China continue to deepen and expand.⁵⁴ In spite of the apparent contradiction between Europe's rhetoric and some aspects of its behavior vis-à-vis China, Europe is nowhere near the risk of being chastised for the contradiction. One explanation for this is that Europe sometimes speaks to China in multiple voices. The fact that various organs of the EU as well as individual EU member-states have different interests and different constituencies with respect to engagement with China makes a "multi-faceted" policy towards China necessary and possible. This means Africa would do well also to take a leaf out of Europe's book.

The final strategy calls for enlightened realism on Africa's part, particularly concerning relations with China which claims to be Africa's "all-weather friend". It is true China had supported national liberation movements (NLMs) in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. And yet the China of the 1960s and 1970s is not the same as the China of today. Apart from being a rising power with ambitions for global leadership, China today is an aspiring (developmental) capitalist state. And the logic of capital is the same irrespective of who is in the driving seat as the capitalist, whether it is the Europeans, the Americans, the Japanese, or the Chinese.⁵⁵ As I argued elsewhere,⁵⁶ there is little doubt that China would like to see Africa succeed. The sense of solidarity with Africa in China's diplomatic thought is quite deep. But the scope of China's interest, and the intentions of its leaders, in Africa will also change along with its national capabilities. China's relatively modest aspirations in Africa today will be supplanted by more expansive ambitions, and as the relationship between China and Africa deepens, their interests, too, can diverge more noticeably.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated in this paper that despite significant difference in their national histories and state capacities, both Japan and China are described as developmental states. The concept of developmental state was born out of the quest for making sense of Japanese capitalism in the post-World War II period, a form of capitalism which neither Karl Marx nor Adam Smith could have understood. When it was invented, the concept had some legitimacy and carried positive connotation. It was somewhat discredited later not only by two decades of economic stagnation in Japan but also by the Asian financial crisis. But when China registered spectacular economic growth in the last three decades, the developmental state was again re-legitimized in the eyes of its practitioners and gained a new lease of life.

We have also argued in this paper that Sino-Japanese diplomacy in Africa in the last 60 years reflected adjustments and readjustments by the two Asian countries to changing domestic, regional and global conditions. The unfolding Sino-Japanese rivalry in Africa was likewise the byproduct of the growing power of China and the anxiety it has caused in Japan, the Fukushima nuclear accident, and the coming to power of an administration in Japan which is committed not only to revitalizing Japan's economy in a certain way (Abenomics) but also pursuing a "muscular" foreign policy towards China. But the Sino-Japanese rivalry in Africa is ultimately rooted in historical animosity between the two countries, especially over history and territory.

54 Casarini (2009).

55 Steinfeld (2010); Gurtov (2013).

56 Adem (2016).

Although both China and Japan are developmental states, they are at different stages of industrialization. It follows that China and Japan may compete but must not necessarily confront each other in Africa. Japan's foreign ministry spokesman Yasuhisa Kawamura struck exactly the right tone in this regard. He said: "China is one of the most enthusiastic investors in Africa and as a leading partner we share their experience and learn from each other."⁵⁷

But, in reality, how likely is it for Japan and China to be partners in Africa? The answer is that it is possible for them to form partnership on an ad hoc basis, but a long-term partnership is less likely. This is so partly because of the nature of Japanese nationalism which is more about the greatness of Japan than the greatness of Asia as such.

No surprise therefore that there are at the moment mixed signals from both sides about the possibility of Sino-Japanese cooperation in Africa, and beyond. On the one hand, for instance, Japanese private companies are expressing interest in participating in China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁵⁸ Furthermore, it was reported recently that "[the Japanese] government will ask China to join in Japan's development projects in Africa [specifically, in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Benin, Kenya, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, and Rwanda]."⁵⁹ Some analysts have even gone further and suggested: "If the Vietnamese can roll out the red carpet for the US president [as they did recently for President Donald Trump], the Chinese can do the same for the Japanese, and vice versa."⁶⁰

On the other hand, Japan has also joined India recently in launching the Asia-Africa growth Corridor (AAGC), which is apparently based on the conviction that China's BRI should be countered.⁶¹ There are dissenting voices about the presumed relationship between AAGC and BRI.⁶² In any case, what we can say for sure therefore is that both Japan and China are closely observing what the other side is doing in Africa.

It is the perspective of this author that both China and Japan could each make unique contributions to Africa's efforts to modernize, if they wish to do so. They could also help themselves to Africa's vast resources. In this case, Africa becomes an arena of cooperation rather than conflict, with all sides benefitting in the process, including Africa. The external behavior of China and Japan in Africa would continue to serve them as a coping mechanism for (actual as well as perceived) changes in their respective countries, in their region and in the international system at large. In the final analysis, however, the relationship between the two Asian powers in Africa would continue to reflect the relationship between them in East Asia.

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57 Quoted in John Aglionby and Leo Lewis, "Japan looks to boost trade with Africa," *Financial Times*, 26 August 2016. [Online.]

58 Kyodo. Ties with Japan gradually improving. *South China Morning Post*, 23 November 2017, p. A5.

59 Chinese cooperation eyed on African projects. *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, 31 December 2017. [Online.]

60 Chandran Nair, Burry the past, *South China Morning Post*, 25 November 2017, p. A14.

61 Jagannath P. Panda, Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC): An India-Japan Arch in the Making? <http://isdpeu/publication/asia-africa-growth-corridor-aagc-india-japan/> [Accessed 18th February 2018.]

62 Chaturvedi (2018).

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