

France and Japan in Africa: a Promising Partnership

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If some African countries are on their way to achieving dynamic economic growth, many are also still struggling with a lack of economic and social infrastructure, latent governance issues and often complex and risky security environments. In this context, both Japan and European countries, especially France, are making efforts to increase not only their development assistance, but also private investments and security cooperation in Sub-Saharan Africa. As two important players on the African continent, Japan and France are also looking to enhance their bilateral cooperation on the field. Based on discussions held during a conference at Ifri in on 10 July 2017, this note explores different avenues for Franco-Japanese cooperation following the views expressed by French and Japanese officials and experts regarding the countries' respective roles on the African continent.

Ensuring sustainable development and economic growth in Africa

Development assistance – from coordination to cooperation

France and Japan have both been long-term, traditional aid donors in Africa. For France, Africa is a priority for largely historical reasons. Indeed, half of the activities overseen by the French Development Agency (AFD) today are located in Africa, and this regional focus is expected to be maintained in the future. But the French contribution is no longer focusing only on Western, French-speaking countries – Kenya, for instance, is the first recipient of French aid today. Paris's approach to Africa has also been reformed this year in favor of a more systemic approach that doesn't distinguish between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa for administrative purposes, for example, but that encourages tailored solutions according to local situations.

In contrast, the bulk of Japan's development assistance is still devoted to the Asian region – only around 15% of Japanese aid goes to Africa. However, Tokyo can take advantage of the lessons and experiences

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learned when dealing with fragile, conflict-affected Asian states such as Cambodia to develop its activities in Africa. Indeed, inclusive growth and massive job creation have been achieved in Asian recipient countries. Moreover, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is a key actor that can claim an extensive network and significant funding to support African development.

French and Japanese approaches to development assistance share a number of characteristics, most notably their focus on creating inclusive growth and jobs for local populations and ensuring high-quality infrastructure development and local skills training. This “like-mindedness” provides an obvious political basis on which to coordinate the two countries’ activities in Africa. These approaches and values are also critical elements that differentiate their offer from those of newer assistance providers, such as China.

JICA and the AFD have thus begun working together on a number of projects, the flagship pilot program being the contribution for sustainable development in Abidjan with a view to aiding in the municipality’s development as a “smart city”. Two complementary axes are funded side by side: the AFD focuses on water and sanitation while JICA is working on roads and transportation. Beyond Abidjan, some synergies can also be found in working to ensure the economic development of the Mombasa area in Kenya – JICA is supporting the development of a Special Economic Zone while AFD is financing basic supplies, such as water.

While the common approach and the complementarities between Japanese and French assistance policies in Africa are clear, the challenge is now to move from coordination to full-fledged cooperation between the two countries. The Franco-Japanese partnership in Africa can develop on the basis of an already successful record of cooperation in Southeast Asian countries. The focus could be put on large urban areas and potential growth poles to ensure sustainable development, massive job creation and inclusive growth.

Private investments – overcoming risks and fears

Another important, common challenge is to properly integrate and engage the private sector to support development and economic growth in Africa, including through Public Private Partnerships.

While the Japanese economic presence in Africa certainly has historical roots, it is still very modest today (less than 700 Japanese companies are present in Africa). Nevertheless, since the 5th TICAD in 2013, the Japanese government has encouraged the private sector to invest in Africa, as it represents a potentially significant market for Japanese products. If Japanese companies have shown interest, a number of challenges remain to be overcome – an important one being the negative image in Tokyo of the general business conditions in Africa. Indeed, Japanese, as well as French companies face several difficulties, such as the lack of reliable economic, energy and social infrastructure, currency instability and problematic political governance. These complications are also increasing the cost of banking guarantees for companies. To hedge against these risks, Japanese companies need pathfinders or partners to invest in Africa. Indian, Dubai-based, as well as French companies may be such possible partners. For French investors in Africa, experience has shown that it is important to be willing to overcome these difficulties in order to eventually reap the benefits of the growing African market. Several companies, after facing difficulties, are now experiencing high profit margins. In order to face the current obstacles, growing cooperation between Japan and France might offer some advantages. The purchase of the French historic retailing company CFAO by Toyota Tshusho in 2012 and the successful management of the company since then demonstrate the complementarities between the two countries.

Moreover, facing “newcomers” in Africa, such as China, India or Morocco, Japan and France can rely on a common approach favoring corporate social responsibility, local content of the projects and anti-corruption measures, for example.

The next steps should be to accelerate the process of consultations, dialogue, and the identification of common projects to allow for a swift implementation and cooperation. Public and private actors should work hand in hand to provide opportunities and support, especially for medium-sized companies.

Contributing to the peace and stability of Africa

Political and security instability on the African continent is a threat not only to Japanese interests – terrorist attacks have cost the lives of more than 15 Japanese citizens since 2012 – but also to the international community. One first objective of Tokyo is thus to prevent conflicts and ensure that post-conflict countries can be stabilized by ensuring the transition between a culture of war and a culture of peace.

Another concern for Japan is the expanded security role of third countries in Africa. In particular, China is now constructing a base in Djibouti and investing extensively into port facilities, particularly in East Africa (Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique, among many others). Tokyo sees these massive investments as potential risks regarding the free access of these ports in the future, if recipient countries eventually fail to reimburse Chinese loans.

While France is active on military counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel region, it is also very much contributing on a longer-term basis to the stabilization of the areas in crisis, through a number of initiatives spreading from the monitoring of sensitive borders between Niger, Burkina-Faso and Mali (with the Sahel Cross-Border Cooperation Assistance Programme (ACTS) project), to capacity-building and training (support to peacekeeping training schools, police schools etc.), and advising services.

Common interests between France and Japan in terms of security contributions in Africa are therefore obvious. It is important for Tokyo to be able to learn from France's extensive knowledge and expertise of the African security environment in a context of growing terrorist attacks. For example, the Japanese Defense Attachés were briefed by the French Ministry of Defense last year. For France, developing security cooperation with Japan is a way to deepen the partnership of exception between the two countries and shows that French authorities are welcoming the Abe administration's willingness to make Japan a real « proactive contributor for peace ».

The 2015 Joint Action Plan for Africa is building on the already existing, modest security cooperation between France and Japan, such as financial co-support for the Dakar International Forum on Peace and Security in Africa, the evacuation of Japanese nationals in

case of emergency (Cote d'Ivoire in 2011, for example) or the co-funding of some peacekeeping schools on the continent. Beyond this, the Action Plan also suggests initiatives to move the cooperation forward. But in reality, it is still difficult to make progress on these elements. Japan's overall response to the French proposal has been cautious for a number of reasons, related to legal and political constraints and priorities.

Promising areas of cooperation are peace-building operations and especially Security Sector Reform (SSR) and institution building. Japan is particularly active on these issues (it was at the initiative of the United Nations Peace-building Commission in 2005), and is dedicating funds and efforts to promote training and capacity-building in African countries (training of police officers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, provision of equipment for the Mali police academy). Today, Tokyo proposes to lead the international contributions on peacebuilding. SSR and security governance are congruent with French and Japanese approaches to uphold liberal values, ensure stability and good governance and prevent conflicts. France already has experience in conducting these kinds of missions and is now working to build a more systemic approach to ensuring better efficiency. Several projects (in particular, for the strengthening of judiciary systems) would need additional resources to be launched and implemented fully. Some coordination has already been seen between Japan and France in Sahel countries on capacity building of police forces and judicial systems (Senegal, Chad, Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Burkina, Mauritania) border control (Mauritania) and) and communications equipment for security agencies (Niger).

Cooperation in peace-building and institution-building projects appears particularly relevant for the Japanese side. Japan's experience in the UN Peacekeeping Operation in South Sudan (2012-2017) indeed demonstrated that it is still difficult for Tokyo to dispatch its Self Defense Forces (SDF) to participate in risky operations overseas. Nevertheless, Japan can still provide benefits elsewhere. For instance, the engineering corps of the Ground SDF has accumulated precious experience that allows them to provide efficient training to African troops (through the UN Project for African Rapid Deployment of Engineering Capabilities (ARDEC) for example). Capacity building, peace building and institution building are the real value-added contribution of Japan in terms of security in Africa today.

Finally, in broader strategic terms, a convergence between the Japanese “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” and the French interests in the Indo-Pacific region could provide an incentive to expand cooperation and coordination in terms of maritime capacity building in East Africa. For all these reasons the Franco-Japanese partnership in Africa is set to grow. Overcoming bureaucratic stovepipes and long decision-making process should allow for an acceleration and expansion of cooperation.