



AFRICAN NARRATIVES

# Japanese-African Relations: A Reading of Common Interests and Strategic Options



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## Introduction

Over the past two decades, the African continent has emerged as an increasingly pivotal hub for international interaction. This rise is driven by its vast natural resources, promising markets, and influential geopolitical position within global trade and energy corridors. In light of this shift, Japan has moved to strengthen its presence in Africa by formulating a new relational model based on balanced economic and developmental partnerships.

This shift reflects Tokyo's growing recognition of the continent's importance in achieving its strategic and economic goals. Japan seeks to diversify its sources of natural resources—particularly vital and rare minerals—expand its foreign

markets, and consolidate its position as an influential international actor to counterbalance growing Chinese influence. Conversely, African nations view cooperation with Japan as an opportunity to enhance sustainable development and acquire advanced Japanese expertise and technology.

Therefore, studying Japanese-African relations provides an entry point for understanding how mutual economic and political interests can be employed to build a partnership based on respect and common benefit. Such a partnership contributes to stability and development in Africa while strengthening Japan's role in the international system.

## Executive Summary

This research paper examines the dimensions of Japanese-African relations amidst current international transformations, focusing on the economic and strategic motives driving Tokyo's engagement. Japan aims to secure vital resources, expand markets, and balance China's rising influence through a partnership model grounded

in development and cooperation. In return, Japan represents a reliable partner for African countries, supporting development processes, technology transfer, and human capital enhancement. The paper concludes that this relationship is deepening, sustained by the principles of mutual benefit and shared interests.

## I. Japanese-African Relations: Goals and Opportunities

Relations between Japan and Africa are gaining significance as the international system undergoes rapid transformation. Africa has become a primary arena for competition among major powers seeking influence, resources, and investment opportunities.

In this context, Japan seeks to consolidate its presence by building partnerships rooted in cooperation and development. This strategy aims to secure an active role on the global stage and keep pace with the involvement of other powers, such as China and the European Union. For African countries, strengthening ties with Tokyo is a strategic choice, offering access to diverse developmental experiences that enhance their economic and technological capabilities.

### 1. Gains and Opportunities for Japan

Diversifying Supply Chains for Critical Minerals Global competition for critical and rare minerals is intensifying, as these resources are essential for modern industries and advanced technologies. Africa holds immense reserves of these materials.

- **Zimbabwe** possesses one of the continent's largest lithium reserves.
- **Mozambique** contributes nearly 10% of global graphite production.
- **The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)** is the world's fourth-largest copper producer, with production reaching nearly 2.5

million tons in 2023.

- **Zambia** is expected to increase its copper production by nearly one million tons by 2026.
- **South Africa** hosts mines with significant rare earth element (REE) reserves, such as the Phalaborwa mine (approx. 30.4 million tons) and the Steenkampskraal mine (approx. 605,000 tons).

To secure these supply chains, Tokyo has signed memoranda of understanding with Zambia and Namibia to develop mineral exploration by Japanese companies. Additionally, Japan pledged a \$1 billion investment in the DRC to explore lithium, cobalt, and copper. These efforts, supported by high-level visits from Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry to resource-rich nations like South Africa, Madagascar, and Angola, underscore Japan's strategy to secure the materials vital for its manufacturing sector. The Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security (JOGMEC) is also participating in exploration projects in South Africa, the DRC, Zambia, and Malawi.

**Balancing Chinese Influence** Strategic rivalry with China is a key determinant of Tokyo's Africa policy. While Japan cannot easily contain Chinese influence, it presents itself as a distinct alternative that aids African nations in diversifying their economic and political alliances, reducing dependence on Beijing.

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Japan has extended loans for port development, including €350 million to Madagascar for the Toamasina port, funding for the Port of Dakar in Senegal, and support for a grain terminal in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. These infrastructure projects, coupled with the promotion of the Japanese brand by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), are designed to compete with Chinese investments. Furthermore, Japan differentiates itself by focusing on human development, health-care, and food security, cooperating with institutions like the World Bank to provide development assistance.

**The "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) Strategy** Announced by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the TICAD 6 summit in Nairobi in 2016, this strategy aims to enhance stability by improving connectivity between Asia and Africa. It promotes freedom of navigation and free trade to ensure economic prosperity along key sea lanes vital to Japan's security. Recently, Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba proposed the "Indian Ocean-Africa Economic Zone Initiative" at TICAD 9 to further integrate the Japanese economy with the Global South.

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5 Japanese Ministry Of Foreign Affairs, Announcement of "Economic Region Initiative of Indian Ocean-Africa" Accessed on 10/7/2025. <https://shorturl.at/iwb1G>

## 2. Gains and Opportunities for African Countries

### Balancing International Partnerships

Engagement with Tokyo allows African nations to diversify partnerships rather than relying excessively on a single external actor. Japan offers a model focused on the humanitarian dimension, mutual respect, and non-interference, supporting the political and economic independence of African states.

### Technology Transfer and Disaster Management

Africa stands to benefit significantly from Japanese technological expertise, particularly in 5G networks, digital infrastructure, and data centers.

- **The Japan New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization (NEDO)** is partnering with Morocco on solar energy projects.

- **NEC** is improving internet networks in South Africa and Kenya.

Additionally, Japan's experience with natural disasters—such as earthquakes and tsunamis—provides valuable lessons for Africa. Following Cyclone Idai in 2019, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) helped Mozambique develop early warning systems and disaster risk reduction strategies. In agriculture, Japan has introduced drought-resistant rice varieties (NERICA) in Uganda to combat food insecurity.

### Supporting Economic Development

Beyond technical expertise, Japan provides direct economic support. At TICAD 9, Japan proposed an economic zone linking the Indian Ocean and Africa and announced \$5.5 billion in loans to support development paths. This continues a legacy of economic aid and bilateral agreements aimed at fostering growth.

6 Sayeka Ghosh, Japan in Africa: Strengthening relations amidst evolving global politics, NIAS Area Studies, Accessed on 10/8/2025. <https://shorturl.at/7HvEw>

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8 Qiraat Africa, Japan unveils \$5.5B plan, AI training to boost Africa ties, Accessed on 10/8/2025. <https://shorturl.at/ZC9Q5>



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## II. Japanese Diplomatic and Development Tools in Africa

Japan employs a diverse array of political, economic, and security tools to strengthen its relations with Africa. These extend beyond financial aid to include peacebuilding and capacity development.

**International Summits (TICAD)** Launched in 1993, the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) is a cornerstone of Japan's multilateral diplomacy. It focuses on three axes:

**1. Economy:** Supporting African exports and capacity building for financial institutions.

**2. Society:** Enhancing youth support, education, and health services.

**3. Peace:** Coordinating peace processes and combating terrorism, cyber threats, and piracy. The initiative has yielded tangible results, such as the \$30 billion aid package announced at TICAD 8, which included \$4 billion for green growth. In addition to the outcomes of the aforementioned TICAD 9 conference.

Peacekeeping and Security Japan actively contributes to security and stability in Africa. It has participated in the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and supports the African Partnership for Rapid Response to Peacekeeping (APRRP). Japan also provides funding and training for counter-terrorism in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, as well as coast guard training in the Gulf of Guinea to improve maritime security.

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## Government Institutions (JICA and JETRO)

• **JICA:** The Japan International Cooperation Agency supports critical infrastructure, such as the Atiak-Nimule road connecting Uganda and South Sudan, and electricity access in the DRC. It also collaborates with the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

• **JETRO:** The Japan External Trade Organization facilitates economic ties, evidenced by recent Memoranda of Understanding with the Ghana Investment Promotion Center and the African Development Bank to explore cross-border partnerships and infrastructure development.

## III. Future Prospects of Cooperation

Japanese-African relations are evolving toward a deeper, sustainable partnership driven by mutual economic and strategic interests. As Africa's importance in Japanese foreign policy grows, Tokyo is likely to increase investments, while African nations will continue to seek Japanese expertise to diversify their international portfolios.

Initiatives like TICAD position Japan as a distinguished partner committed to human-centric

development (education and health) and peace. However, Japan faces the challenge of intense competition from other global powers, particularly China and the EU, whose initiatives (such as the Belt and Road Initiative) entail massive investments. Despite this, the Japanese model—grounded in shared values and mutual respect—offers a competitive edge that can deepen ties if maintained.

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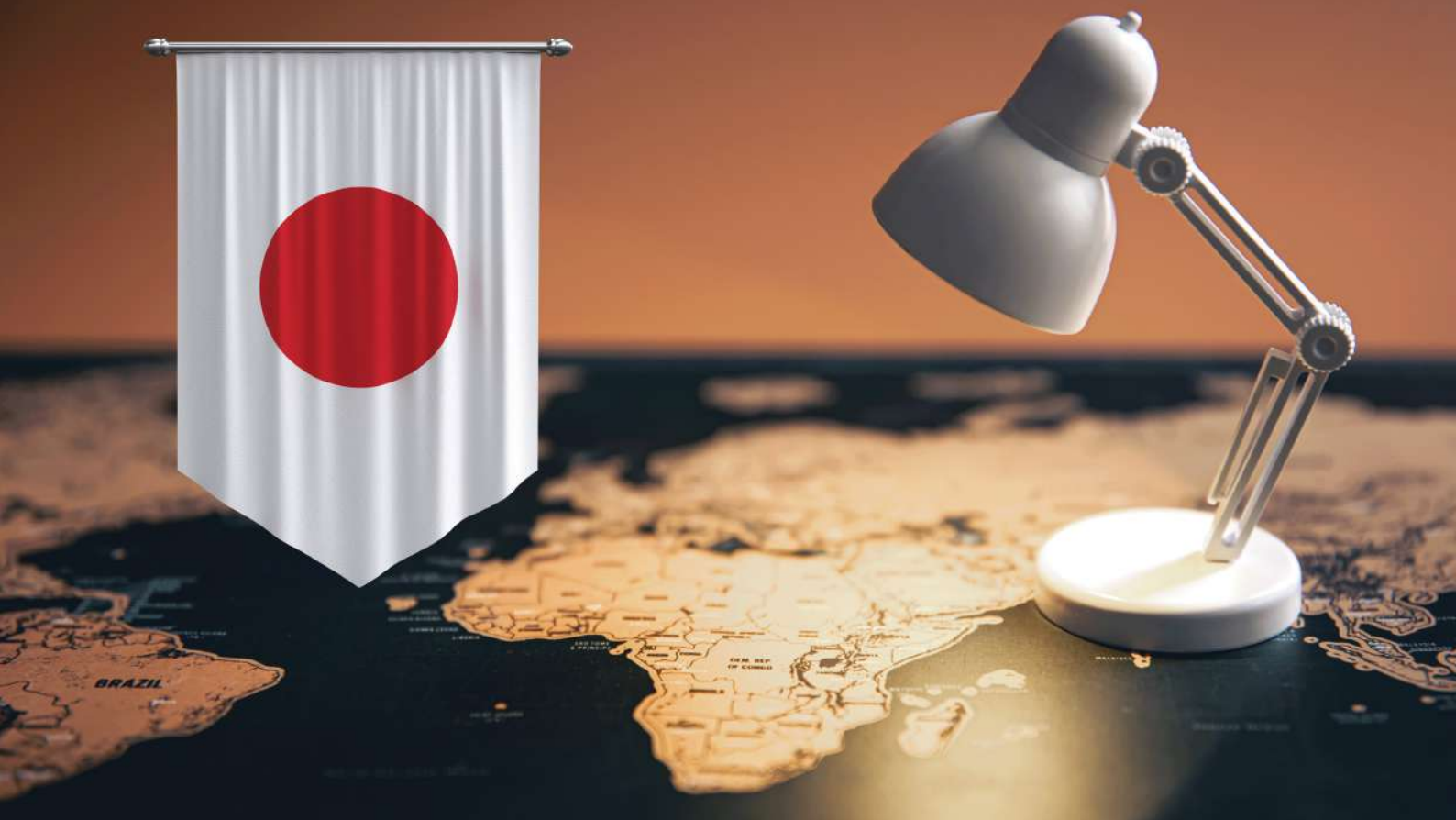
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## Conclusion

Japanese-African relations have transcended traditional development aid, moving toward a strategic partnership based on shared economic and humanitarian interests. Africa has become integral to Japan's foreign policy regarding resource security and market expansion. Simultaneously, Japan serves as a reliable partner for Africa, aiding in sustainable development and institutional independence. The future of this relationship holds promising prospects, provided Tokyo maintains its model of equal partnership amidst escalating global competition. Success depends on adhering to the principles of mutual benefit and joint development as the foundation for a balanced and sustainable alliance.