The relationship between Japan and Africa is a relatively less explored field, but the paucity of attention is not necessarily reflective of the degree of its complexity. Instead, it has to do partly with linguistic barriers, partly with ‘psychological’ distance, and partly with the low level of interdependence between Japan and Africa.

It is therefore remarkable to see the publication of three books on Japan–Africa relations in the same year, in the English language, by Japanese and non-Japanese (including African) experts. Although the books vary in what they seek to (and do) accomplish, they all single-mindedly grapple with interactions between Africa and Japan, as they presumably are and as they ought to be. Moreover, it is clear from what is said or suggested in the books that the rise of China and its increased activities in Africa provide a foreground for the analyses.

The two major issues examined with varying degrees of emphasis in the books under review, which are of particular interest to this reviewer, are the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD)—there have been four such conferences to date—and China’s increased activities in Africa, in the context of their potential impact on Japan-Africa relations. I would first share my thoughts on the two issues and then proceed to review each book briefly.

**Africa and TICAD**

In the literature about TICAD, there is a tendency to conceptualize it as if it were devoid of historical context and to view it as an unchanging or unchangeable phenomenon. My argument here is that the study of TICAD diplomacy has lagged behind TICAD diplomacy, and that TICAD diplomacy has indeed run its course, coming to a halt around 2005.

TICAD diplomacy formally began in 1993 when Japan launched the forum to deliberate on how the human condition in Africa could be improved in Africa. First proposed by Japan at the UN General Assembly in 1991, TICAD was based on the twin premises that ‘Africa needs the partnership of the developed nations’ and ‘Africa needs to do it itself’. But the initiative was also an outcome of Japan’s desire for greater legitimacy and leadership in the wider international community.

Japan’s aspiration for a permanent membership in a reformed UN Security Council and its interest in garnering support of the African continent from a voting bloc after the end of the Cold War were also relevant factors for the birth of TICAD. As one Japanese-Africanist put it, Japan was seeking at this time to become ‘a political power’. From this perspective, Japan had to take diplomatic initiatives and show a degree of independence from the West. In a short span of time, Japan was therefore transformed from a ‘reactive’ to a ‘post-reactive’ state, and the gap has widened rapidly. From Angola to Burundi, from Cameroon to the Central African Republic and Chad, China has become one of the principal trading partners for several countries in Africa. We can therefore say that China’s activities in Africa certainly provide the context for Japanese post-TICAD diplomacy in the continent. But how does China in Africa influence Japan’s post-TICAD diplomacy?

**China and Japan in Africa**

China and Japan have followed divergent and sometimes contrary approaches in their relations with Africa, with the growing power of China and its ambition for global hegemony sharpening the contrast in recent years. The divergent patterns of external behavior of the two countries indeed emanate from a fundamental difference in the long-standing principles of their political classes. Related to this is also the discordant perception of “self” and the “other”. Japan is part of the Global North geo-politically; China considers itself part of the ‘Third World’. Continuity has nevertheless marked the behaviors of Japan and China in Africa, even as each strove to make adjustments to the changing structures of the international system while, at the same time, trying to change the system itself in desirable ways.

Recently, China has overtaken Japan in the level of economic interactions with Africa. China has also bolstered its growing economic presence in Africa with an equally formidable soft power. China has replaced not only Japan but even some former colonial powers as major trading partner as well as source of aid and investment for many African countries.

Historically, Japan has not only been the first non-European country to successfully industrialize but also the only non-European economic powerhouse. Primarily for ideological reasons, however, Japan’s policies toward Africa in the past had dovetailed that of the West. The rise of China now only adds to the ranks of successfully industrialized nations of non-European stock, but more importantly, China emerges as a major power whose ideology, too, is different.

A large number of Africa’s rulers now view China as a model of development. The reasoning involved here is first, that the socio-economic conditions and the historical experiences of China are broadly similar to those in many African countries. The second and related reason has more to do with China’s continued success in modernizing its economy in a relatively short period of time. Additionally, China is viewed as a model because the neo-liberal approach to development has been presumably tried and failed in Africa. Many leaders in Africa warmly embrace China because of its non-interventionist inclinations as well. Of course, China’s...
Further, preliminary evidence suggests that there is a connection between Japan’s aid diplomacy in China and China’s aid diplomacy in Africa. In its economic activities in Africa, China has been practicing what it had learned from Japan over the years as an aid recipient. If Japan is indeed the genesis of China’s aid diplomacy in Africa, the implications are significant. For one thing, this would also mean that the Chinese development assistance must be more for understanding how the engagement between Africa and Asia’s two major powers could have a more positive and durable impact in Africa.

The Books under Review

The monograph by B. Z. Osei-Hwedie and K. Osei-Hwedie deals with the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD). The authors examine TICAD and assess its achievements. They also address issues about the relevance of the East Asian model for Africa’s development. Their articulation of what the East Asian model is and whether or not it is relevant is, however, logically untenable. The major strength of the monograph is that it raises fundamental questions about the matter under consideration even if it falls short of satisfactorily answering them. The discussion also deepens our understanding of TICAD without, however, adequately clarifying the philosophy and politics underlying it.

A product of several visits to Japan, Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo’s Japan-Africa Relations is a significant book for at least two reasons. It is the first book after Jan Morikawa’s Japan and Africa: Big Business and Diplomacy (1997) to come out as a major, single-authored book written in the English language about the relationship between Japan and Africa. It is also arguably the first of its kind to integrate firmly Japan-Africa relations into the broader Japanese economy of North-South relations by drawing upon theories of international relations. A densely-written treatise with invaluable theoretical insights, the book has the objective of studying the complexity of the relationship between Japan and Africa, examining the trends and analysing the policy implications.

Lumumba-Kasongo’s book is a supermarket of ideas about several themes ranging from the Bandung Conference to the nature of African and Japanese states and from ‘Pax Nipponica’ to ‘Pax-Africana’. The book also asks questions which it does not pretend to answer, paving the way for future researchers. Even if one may have reservations about aspects of theoretical interpretations, especially in chapter two, no serious Africanist would dispute the potential utility of the concepts and theories deployed in the book by political scientist Lumumba-Kasongo. The significance, too, of the various themes of the book’s chapters cannot be lost to a serious reader, but the author does not take even that for granted; in each chapter, he helps explain how that particular theme is pertinent to Japan-Africa relations, whether the theme is Japan’s economic model or that of its nature of its party politics, its pacific political culture or its philosophy.

Further, the book has remained a significant contribution to the field of Japanese studies and will be an asset to anyone interested in Japan’s role in Africa.

Howard Lebanon’s research on the subject is well-founded. His book provides rich analyses and original conceptual interpretations, especially in the key concepts, the history and theoretical interpretations provided in the book. It is also the most abstract. In his approach, he sometimes realize. Japan, too, had been subject to Western encroachment on its sovereignty but it was never colonized. And Japan, too, had been less predisposed after the Second World War to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries even though the restraint was less rooted in the principle of non-intervention. Japan had no appetite for intervention because of its political culture that had historically tended to discourage diplomatic activism in general and its postwar constitution that has imposed considerable constraint on the infrastructures of the nation.

Another area of convergence between Japan and China in Africa is the focus on infrastructure. A lot has been expected from China to show whether China pays significant attention to Africa’s infrastructure in its aid and investment. What is equally true is that more than 40 per cent of Japan’s official economic aid to Africa, at least in the last two decades, was invested in the infrastructure sector.

It should be noted that Japan and China have begun to compete more than we sometimes realize. Japan, too, had been subject to Western encroachment on its sovereignty but it was never colonized. And Japan, too, had been less predisposed after the Second World War to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries even though the restraint was less rooted in the principle of non-intervention. Japan had no appetite for intervention because of its political culture that had historically tended to discourage diplomatic activism in general and its postwar constitution that has imposed considerable constraint on the foreign activities of the nation.

In a nutshell, Howard Lebanon’s book provides rich analyses and original insights about Japan’s aid policy toward Africa. The authors of the different chapters go to great lengths to help the reader grasp what ‘self-help’ means, sometimes by linking it up with Japan’s own historical experiences. In closing, he can be said that the conceptual interpretations provided in the book are comprehensive, which is, of course, not a bad thing as it would only vitalize the debate and inspire further investigations.

The publication of the book under review is welcome news. That the major themes therein are closely inter-related, with each theme highlighting different dimensions of the relationship, and that the books were all suitably published in the same year, make them a uniquely valuable set of resources for understanding Japan-Africa relations.