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IN FOCUS

Japan in Africa: Renewed Efforts to Revitalise Relations

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COMMENTARY

Japan in Africa: Renewed Efforts to Revitalise Relations

With a majority of African countries facing the dire prospect of defaulting accumulation of loans, Japan can be a credible alternative as a developmental partner

Devjyoti Saha



Image source: AMR ABDALLAH DALSH/Reuters

During 30 April-05 May 2023, Japanese Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida embarked on a bilateral visit to four African countries: Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, and Mozambique, all within a short period of time. This was his first visit to the African continent, and also the first multiple-country visit by a Japanese Prime Minister after Shinzo Abe's visit to Africa in 2014. Japan has recently increased its focus on its relations with Africa, as reflected in a recent visit.

Kishida's Africa Visit: Major Highlights in Egypt, Ghana, Kenya and Mozambique

The visit began in Egypt, where Kishida held a meeting with the Secretary-General, Ahmed Aboul Gheit and the permanent representatives to the League of Arab States. During the meeting, he reflected upon Japan's contribution to Palestine through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Additionally, he also announced the third Japan-Arab Political Dialogue in September to further cooperation and coordination between Japan and the Arab countries.

Kishida, spoke at the Japan-Egypt Business Forum to strengthen trade

between the two countries and look for new ways to work together. Afterwards, he had discussions with the Prime Minister of Egypt, Mostafa Madbouly.

On 1 May, Kishida visited Ghana. He started the visit with a courtesy call from the Overseas Cooperation Volunteers of the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA). He spoke with members of Japanese industries and highlighted the economic significance of Ghana for Japan. He pointed out that Ghana's stable democratic government makes it a valuable market for Japanese industries, especially since it is one of the few African countries with such stability.

After his talks with the JICA volunteers, Kishida addressed the important Japan-Ghana summit. The summit reflected upon the decades-old bilateral relationship between the two countries that has been nurtured over the years. In his address, Kishida reaffirmed Japan's support for Ghana in combating terrorism and Islamic radicalism stemming from the unstable Central Sahel region. Both leaders also agreed on strengthening their cooperation and coordination at the international level as non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

In Kenya, he met the JICA volunteers. He discussed with the volunteers regarding their activities in Kenya, which involved working with the Kenyan locals to ensure proper utilisation of the Japanese Overseas Development Assistance. After inspecting the work carried out by the JICA volunteers in Kenya, Kishida and Kenyan President William Ruto attended the

Japan-Kenya Summit marking the 60th anniversary of Kenya-Japan bilateral relations. In his address during the summit, Kishida reiterated his predecessor Shinzo Abe's commitment to a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”

In Mozambique, he followed the same schedule as Ghana and Kenya. He had a meeting with the JICA volunteers, followed by the Japan-Mozambique summit. The summit was attended by Mozambican President Felipe Jacinto Nyusi. Kishida called upon Nyusi to join the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” He also stressed on resuming the construction of the Mitsui and Co. LNG development projects to enhance Japan's access to Mozambique's vast oil reserves. To deepen their bilateral economic engagement, both leaders agreed to continue the ongoing Public and Private Sector Joint Mission for Promoting Trade and Investment in Africa.

In all the above visits, Kishida sought the national leaders' support against the Russian aggression in Ukraine. However, other than Ghana, no other country agreed to issue a statement in support of Global North's campaign against Russian aggression. This reflects upon the challenges of Russian and Chinese dominance that Japan needs to counter to intensify its relations with the African continent. It should begin with addressing the unfulfilled promises of Prime Minister Kishida's predecessors.

Addressing Abe's unfulfilled promises

One of the major reasons behind Shinzo Abe's repetitive emphasis on the geopolitical concept of Indo-Pacific was to broaden the narrow region of Asia-Pacific and accommodate Africa as a part of its central foreign policy theme. During Shizo Abe's reign, the rhetoric was stronger than the on-ground action. The number of Japanese industries in Africa has significantly decreased from 520 in 2010 to 769 in 2019, and ODA went down from

USD 12 billion in 2013 to USD 6 billion in 2019.

The multi-state visit to Africa by Kishida has largely been perceived as “catching up” efforts by Japan in a region where China has deeply seated itself in a dominant position. Since 2005, China's trade with all 53 African countries has taken a positive trajectory, and in 2019, China accounted for 11 per cent of all African exports. China is African countries' largest trading partner, with a total trade of USD 200 billion in 2019. Along with trade, Africa has continued to receive a constant inflow of Chinese FDI valued at USD 78 billion, while Japan does not even feature among the top five investors in Africa. China's strong state-controlled banking system has allowed it to provide African countries with much-needed concessional loans. A major part of these funds is utilised in the construction of infrastructure projects as a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

On the other hand, Japanese investment and economic presence have gone significantly down in Africa. Japan is an industrial powerhouse, but it is entirely dependent on other countries for resources. Hence, stable, and closer relations with African countries are significant for Japan. However, in a majority of the cases, the African countries have defaulted, accumulating Chinese loans that either lead to a complete takeover of projects, including the Greenfield Airport in Nairobi or the Mombasa port, or it leads to a complete debt-trap situation like in Zambia and Ghana.

Ghana and Kenya, which were part of Kishida's visit, are currently negotiating with China to restructure their loans. With a majority of African countries facing the dire prospect of defaulting accumulation of loans, Japan can be a credible alternative as a developmental partner. Japan has proved its authenticity as a reliable

development partner in India and Brazil, and it doesn't have the historical baggage of colonisation and exploitation like the West. It gives the country an advantage over its Western competitors, including France and the UK, that are also seeking influence in the resource-rich continent.

However, it remains unclear whether Japan would grasp the rising opportunities or would again lose them due to the lack of actions required to support the promises and commitments made by the Kishida government.

AFRICA IN BRIEF

23 May - 30 May

By Jerry Franklin and Immaculine Joy Paul

ALGERIA

Political opponent Karim Tabbou arrested

On 24 May, Africanews reported the arrest of the Algerian opposition leader, Karim Tabbou, a part of the pro-democracy Hirak movement in 2019. The movement aimed to overthrow the ruling system, after Algeria became independent in 1962. In 2020, Tabbou was given a one-year prison term over a video on his party's Facebook account that was "undermining national security." According to the National Committee for the Liberation of Detainees, several people who had connections to the Hirak movement and who defended individual freedoms have been arrested in Algeria. ("[Prominent Algerian opposition figure arrested again](#)," *Africanews*, 24 May 2023)

SUDAN

Air strikes and clashes persist despite ceasefire

On 23 May, BBC reported that air strikes and clashes continued in Khartoum which weakened the latest attempt of ceasefire. The new seven-day truce came into effect on 22 May. The truce came about because of formal talks facilitated by Saudi Arabia and the United States. According to a US-Saudi statement, the new agreement would be enforced by a ceasefire monitoring mechanism, which acknowledged prior failures to maintain peace. Gen Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo

issued an audio message right before the truce came into effect stating that his troops would not retreat until they end the coup. ("[Sudan conflict: Air strikes and clashes as new ceasefire begins](#)," *BBC*, 23 May 2023)

The US accuses Wagner Group of missiles supply

On 25 May, Al Jazeera reported the United States accusing Russia's Wagner Group of prolonging the conflict by providing surface-to-air missiles to the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan. The US Treasury Department stated that the surface-to-air missiles contributed to a prolonged armed conflict that only resulted in further chaos in the region. The US stated that ongoing conflict would lead to a severe humanitarian crisis and it focuses to reduce the violence and return the country to civilian rule. ("[US accuses Wagner Group of supplying missiles to Sudan's RSF](#)," *Al Jazeera*, 25 May 2023)

ETHIOPIA

Protestors demand the withdrawal of Eritrean troops

On 23 May, Al Jazeera reported that there were mass demonstrations in the Tigray region demanding the return of the displaced population due to the conflict and the withdrawal of foreign forces as the conflict had ended with a truce signed in November 2022. The battle between the

federal troops and the Tigrayan forces left thousands of people dead. Millions of people were forced to leave their homes. The Eritrean troops which were not mentioned in the truce continued to operate in several border towns.

(“[Protesters in Ethiopia’s Tigray demand Eritrean troops withdraw](#),” *Al Jazeera*, 23 May 2023)

SOMALIA

Russia offers support against terrorism

On 26 May, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov offered assistance to Somalia in its fight against terrorism, after talks with his Somali Foreign Minister Abshir Omar Jama in Moscow. Lavrov stated that Russia would supply military equipment to the Somali army to assist them in their fight against extremists, including al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda. The offer highlighted the growing interest of Russia in seeking alliances with regimes.

(“[Russia offers support to Somali army in fight against terrorist groups](#),” *Africanews*, 26 May 2023)

GHANA

The country will soon resume borrowing, says President

On 24 May, Ghanaian President Akufo-Addo said at the Qatar-Africa Economic Forum in Doha that since it will start borrowing funds from global savings against the economic crisis. The government, which is under criticism for extensive borrowing, was excluded from the international capital market due to its huge debt. But it can be accessed hereafter following the previous week’s USD three billion bailout by the IMF. The economic position is being blamed on the Ukraine-Russia war and the Covid 19 pandemic. However, he mentioned that the government will reduce its expenditure and create more domestic revenue.

(“[Ghana to soon start borrowing again - president](#),” *BBC*, 24 May 2023)

SOUTH AFRICA

Refusal to release cargo documents raises scrutiny

On 25 May, Africanews reported that the South African government was facing pressure when a lawmaker asked Defense Minister Thandi Modise to release the cargo documents related to the Russian ship. African National Congress Secretary General Fikile Mbalula stated: “If it was according to the ANC, we would want President Putin to be here, even tomorrow, to come to our country.” The statement added more scrutiny to the allegations of shipping ammunition to Russia. South Africa's main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, challenged the government to prove against the accusations and release the cargo manifest.

(“[South Africa under more scrutiny over Russian ship as ruling ANC says it would 'welcome' Putin](#),” *Africanews*, 25 May 2023)

CAMEROON

More than 30 women kidnapped

On 24 May, the separatists in Cameroon’s north-western region abducted around 30 women, leaving several injured in Big Babanki, a village near the border with Nigeria. The women were kidnapped while protesting against the curfew and taxes imposed on them by the separatists. Separatist leader Capo Daniel said that the women were being punished for allowing themselves to be “manipulated” by the Cameroonian government. The military said that troops have been deployed to secure the abducted women. The country is facing conflicts since the 2017 rebellion launched by the English-speaking separatists. (“[Over 30 women abducted by separatists in Cameroon](#),” *BBC*, 24 May 2023)

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

President Tshisekedi visits China

On 22 May, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China announced that the President of the

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Felix Tshisekedi, intended to meet the President of China, Xi Jinping, from 24 May to 29 May. The summit aims to formally restructure trade deals between the two countries and finalise a USD six billion infrastructure-for-minerals deal with Chinese investors. The DRC is the world's largest producer of cobalt which is used in batteries and has substantial deposits of gold, lithium, diamonds, and tantalum. Tshisekedi stated that a task force submitted its conclusions about the deal, enabling dialogues with Chinese partners. ([“Trade deal signing expected as DRC leader visits China this week,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, 22 May 2023)

MALI

The US sanctions the head of the Wagner Group

On 26 May, BBC reported that the US Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) imposed sanctions on the head of Wagner Group, Ivan Aleksandrovich Maslov, for supporting Russia's war against Ukraine. The US accused the Wagner Group of trying to exploit the abundance of arms in Mali. The treasury department imposed sanctions by accusing Maslov of acquiring military equipment for the war in Ukraine through the operations of the Wagner Group in Mali. The US Treasury Department stated: “The Wagner Group's presence on the African continent is a destabilizing force for any country that allows for the deployment of the group's resources into their sovereign territory.” ([“Wagner: US sanctions boss of mercenary group in Mali,”](#) *BBC*, 25 May 2023)

Demonstrators demand to end UN peacekeeping mission

On 26 May, Al Jazeera reported that thousands of protestors gathered in Bamako demanding an end to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MUNISMA) that was established to

support foreign and local troops battling the armed groups. The rally was organized by the transitional Prime Minister Chogel Maiga and civil society organisations supporting the transitional military government. The protesters blamed the mission of failing to protect the population and for not bringing any results. Malians were dissatisfied with the mission of their disagreements with the Malian military government because of their connection with the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group. ([“Mali protesters demand exit of UN peacekeeping mission,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, 26 May 2023)

US accuses Mali as Wagner Group's transit route

On 23 May, the United States Department of State accused Russia's Wagner mercenary force of using false paperwork to ship military equipment through Mali. State Department spokesperson Mathew Miller stated: “We have been informed that Wagner is seeking to transit material acquisitions to aid Russia's war through Mali and is willing to use false paperwork for these transactions. In fact, there are indications that Wagner has been attempting to purchase military systems from foreign suppliers and route these weapons through Mali as a third party.” Additionally, Miller stated that these accusations have not yet been proven and added that the US has been imposing sanctions on entities supporting Wagner's military operations. ([“US says Russia's Wagner force eyes Mali as route for war supplies,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, 23 May 2023)

SIERRA LEONE

Heavy downpour makes a centuries-old national treasure fall

On 25 May, Al Jazeera reported torrential rains and storms causing the falling of a nearly 400 years old cotton tree that served as a national symbol of liberty for decades. The tree was founded by enslaved Africans who returned from the United States. The President of Sierra Leone,

Julius Bio, stated: “It was regarded as a symbol of liberty and freedom by early settlers.” (“[Storm fells symbolic 400-year-old cotton tree in Sierra Leone](#),” *Al Jazeera*, 25 May 2023)

MOROCCO

Ukrainian foreign minister visits Rabat

On 23 May, Al Jazeera reported that the meeting between Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita happened in Rabat on 22 May, to enhance bilateral cooperation. The key point of discussion included the situation of Moroccan students in Ukraine, coordination between the two countries with a renewed emphasis on political dialogue and economic cooperation, trade facilitation, food security, territorial integrity, and regional security. Kuleba and Bourita signed a memorandum of understanding and exchange program intended to improve diplomats' awareness of one another's foreign policy, particularly concerning Africa. (“[Ukrainian and Moroccan FMs meet in Rabat](#),” *Al Jazeera*, 23 May 2023)

REGIONAL

Aid agencies to support UN's appeal for food crisis in the Horn of Africa

On 23 May, Al Jazeera reported that humanitarian agencies agreed to support the United Nations' appeal for USD Seven billion for the Horn of Africa as more than 43.3 million people are in need of food

assistance. The UN is convening a high-level pledging event on 24 May where member states, and partners will be encouraged to provide financial aid to the Horn of Africa's crisis. International Rescue Committee President David Miliband stated: “Efforts to combat food insecurity need to be urgently scaled up across a wider group of governments, international financial institutions, and climate actors.” Additionally, Miliband stated that the appeals have received less than a quarter of the needed donations until now. (“[Aid agencies back UN's \\$7bn appeal for Horn of Africa food crisis](#),” *Al Jazeera*, 23 May 2023)

INTERNATIONAL

Ukraine's Foreign Minister tours Africa

On 22 May, Al Jazeera reported that Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba started his Africa tour to secure the support of the African countries on the peace plan introduced by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. The visit reflects Kyiv's diplomatic push to challenge Russian influence in the Global South- Latin America, Africa, and much of Asia. Kuleba stated that the visit aimed to win support for the continuous flow of Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea and secure new venues for Ukrainian business. (“[Ukraine courts 'Global South' in push to challenge Russia](#),” *Al Jazeera*, 22 May 2023)

About the authors

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About NIAS Africa Studies

As a part of the area studies initiatives, the Institute started a focussed study on Pakistan in 2020. In 2021, it expanded the area studies to include Europe Studies, China Reader, and Maritime Studies. In 2022, the Science, Technology and International Relations (STIR) programme at the Institute is further expanding its area studies, to include Africa.

The primary focus of NIAS Africa studies would be on the following five verticals: contemporary political issues, colonial legacies, problems of governance, civil-military equations, and the rise of radical Islamic groups. The primary objective is to study Africa from an internal prism. ,

NIAS Africa Studies would include a series of expert lectures, workshops, publications and a weekly exclusively focussed on Africa. The initiative also aims to create a network of young scholars studying Africa and also African scholars studying in various Indian institutions.

About the team

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