

Japanese PM's aggressive diplomatic push in Africa

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe concluded a week-long trip to the Middle East and Africa on Tuesday with a speech at the African Union headquarters in Ethiopia, pledging to provide \$320 million in aid “in order to respond to the conflicts and disasters in Africa.” He promised another \$2 billion in loans to the African private sector, doubling a 2012 pledge.

Abe made a direct intervention into the crisis in South Sudan, which is already a hotbed of intrigue, particularly between the US and China. He called for an end to factional fighting and promised \$25 million in assistance. Japan has sent around 400 military personnel to South Sudan as part of UN forces in the country.

Abe's tour of Africa, including Ivory Coast, Mozambique and Ethiopia, was the first by a serving Japanese prime minister since 2006. The trip was aimed at expanding Japanese economic and political influence in Africa and curbing China's already significant presence in this region, which is strategically vital for both countries. Abe was accompanied by some 50 business executives.

Encouraged by the US “pivot to Asia,” a comprehensive strategy of diplomatic and military pressure against China, Japan has engaged in a diplomatic offensive of its own. Since coming to power just over a year ago, Abe has visited 29 countries, including all 10 members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and all six Gulf monarchies.

Abe's intervention in Africa is part of intense rivalry for resources and strategic influence. The WSWS commented a year ago in “2013 and the new Scramble for Africa”: “Africa is in play as far as Washington and all other major powers are concerned. US aims in

Africa centre on securing hegemony over the entire continent, a conflict in which its chief rival is now China.”

China's emergence as the world's chief cheap labour platform has driven it to seek energy and resources, particularly from Africa, bringing it into competition with the major powers that have long dominated the continent. Since 2009, China has been Africa's top trading partner. Its direct investment was reportedly seven times that of Japan in 2011, and its exports five times larger.

The US and European powers, especially France, have responded by seeking to shore up their own interests in Africa, including through military interventions in Libya, Ivory Coast, Mali and Central African Republic. Significantly, as Abe was heading to Africa, the Japanese foreign and defence ministers were in Paris last week for a “2 plus 2” meeting with their French counterparts to secure closer diplomatic, economic and military collaboration, including in Africa.

Abe has identified Africa as a major priority. At the fifth Tokyo International Conference on African Development, held in Yokohama last June and attended by about 40 African heads of state, Japan promised up to \$32 billion in public and private assistance over the next five years. Unlike previous years, the emphasis was not on aid, but on investment and trade.

Abe's tour coincided with that of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who toured Ethiopia, Djibouti, Ghana and Senegal between January 6 and 11. The tensions between the two countries were never far from the surface.

Abe's spokesman Tomohiko Taniguchi told the BBC that “countries like Japan... cannot provide African leaders with beautiful houses or beautiful ministerial

buildings,” but “Japan’s aid policy is to really aid the human capital of Africa.” This was a direct jab at China, which is known for financing presidential palaces and other official buildings, including the African Union headquarters at which Abe spoke on Tuesday.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang responded in kind. During a meeting with Ethiopia’s health minister, he declared that China’s aid to Ethiopia was completely selfless, adding that China did not approve of “certain countries” that offered aid to Africa for purely political motives. He hinted that Japan was trying to win African votes in a bid for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council.

These caustic exchanges take place amid heightened tensions between the two countries over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. Amid the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” the Abe government has aggressively asserted control of the islands, using the dispute to justify an expansion of the Japanese military.

Under pressure from the US and its allies, China has responded by whipping up anti-Japanese chauvinism at home. This again spilled over in Africa. Following Abe’s speech in Addis Ababa on Tuesday, China’s ambassador to the African Union, Xie Xiaoyan, branded the Japanese prime minister as “the biggest troublemaker in Asia” and declared that his trip to Africa was part of a “China containment policy.”

Abe’s trip had significant economic objectives. In Ivory Coast, Abe told President Alassane Ouattara that Japan would provide \$83.4 million in humanitarian assistance to stabilise the southern Saharan Sahel region by March, of which \$7.7 million would go to Ivory Coast. Abe is seeking to use the country to gain access to markets in West Africa, with its population of some 300 million.

In Mozambique, Abe sought to secure liquefied natural gas (LNG) and other mineral supplies. The southern African nation plans to build the second largest LNG export site in the world, with a capacity of 20 million tonnes a year by 2018. Chiyoda Corp. is among the companies bidding for contracts to construct the plants, which could cost \$20 billion.

Mitsui & Co. has a stake in Mozambique’s coal fields and Nippon Steel is developing a coal mine in the country, slated to start production in 2016. Japan also

announced some \$680 million in loans to Mozambique, to finance infrastructure projects, including the construction of a highway connecting the country’s Nacala port to Malawi and Zambia.

In Ethiopia, Abe announced that the country would receive \$11 million in refugee support and a further \$4.8 million for its agricultural sector. Japan will also invest in geothermal power production in Ethiopia, and the two countries have reportedly established the first direct flights between them.

Under Abe, Japan is raising the stakes as it seeks to compete in the new scramble for Africa. Abe told the African Union: “I myself would like to visit Africa multiple times as necessary, in order to support vigorously these efforts to bring about a brilliant future for Africa.”



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