



The Art of Summitry

What the United States Can Learn from Japan's Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD)

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THE ISSUE

- The Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), which first started in 1993, is reorienting itself toward trade and investment to remain competitive in a period of geopolitical rivalries.
- TICAD's evolution shows the strengths of summits as venues for whole-of-government engagement and as marketplaces to promote business, as well as their weaknesses, such as prompting negative comparisons to global competitors and fostering unreasonable expectations for host governments.
- The United States has an opportunity to revive its U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, showcasing new policy initiatives and renewing its commitment to engaging the region.

INTRODUCTION

It has recently become fashionable to host a regional summit with African leaders. The Arab states, China, the European Union, France, India, Russia, and Turkey all established high-profile diplomatic forums with African counterparts. Japan has been one of the pacesetters, inviting African governments, as well as multilateral institutions, to attend TICAD since 1993. TICAD's seventh iteration, which was staged in Yokohama from August 28-30, 2019, welcomed 42 African presidents, vice presidents, and prime ministers and witnessed the signing of 110 memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with African countries and private-sector companies.^{1, 2}

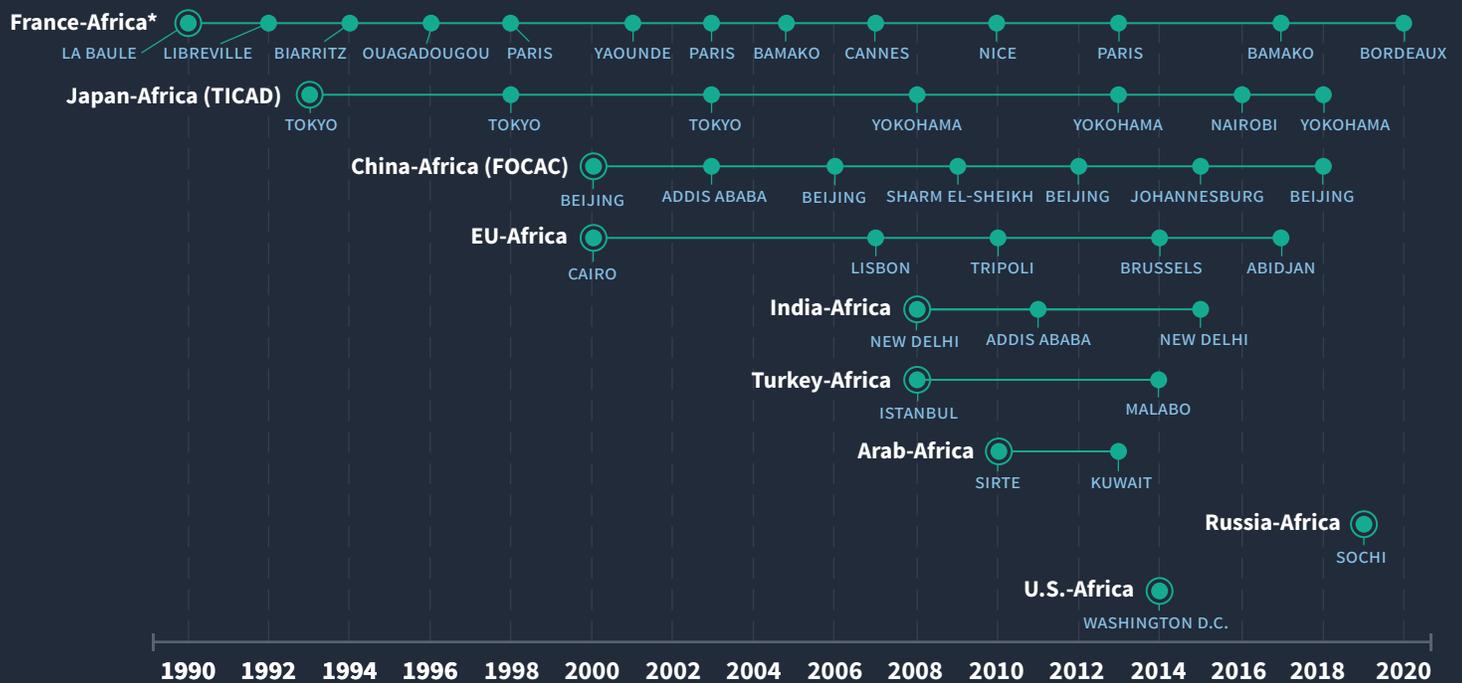
The United States chaired one such event, the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, in August 2014. While it represented a milestone in U.S.-African diplomatic engagement, the United States has not attempted anything on the same scale since. In 2016, the U.S. Department of Commerce with Bloomberg Philanthropies chaired a second U.S.-

Africa Business Forum. President Trump met with eight sub-Saharan African leaders on the margins of the UN General Assembly in 2017 and separately invited Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari and Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta to the White House in 2018. If the U.S. government decides to resume the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, it has the potential to deepen ties between the United States and African counterparts, as well as promote trade and investment and advance signature initiatives.

A SUMMIT WITH “JAPANESE CHARACTERISTICS”

At the conclusion of this year's TICAD summit, the Japanese government released a communique that stressed the conference's “unique role” as a multilateral forum while acknowledging that it also reflects the evolving relationship between Japan and its African counterparts.³ The summit, however, has its share of detractors; for instance, *Nikkei* and *Asia Times* columnist William Pesek called it “short on muscle [and] creativity.”⁴

REGIONAL SUMMITS WITH AFRICAN LEADERS (1990-2020)



*Fifteen additional summits were convened by France with African diplomats between 1973 and 1989, with the upcoming 2020 summit in Bordeaux marking the 28th France-Africa Summit. <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20100528-24-sommets-france-afrique-1992-2007>

TICAD, like other summits, advances three foreign policy objectives: (1) strengthen relations with African counterparts; (2) facilitate private-sector deals; and (3) promote global priorities.

- **Relationship-building.** Japan leverages TICAD to deepen ties with African leaders. Indeed, Japanese officials seemed to view high-level participation as a key metric of success. In May, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sent his foreign minister to Angola, Ethiopia, and South Africa to guarantee head of state participation at TICAD.⁵ In bilateral meetings, Abe affirmed Japan’s partnership and committed his government to continue its development assistance. For some African leaders, TICAD is the only opportunity to engage with their Japanese counterparts.
- **Dealmaking.** Japan uses TICAD to advance and generate commercial transactions. In Yokohama, Abe pledged to “do whatever it takes to assist the advancement of Japanese companies into Africa.”⁶ Several companies, including Toyota and

top Japanese banks, signed MOUs or announced expansion plans.^{7,8} There were multiple side events staged to connect Japanese and African entrepreneurs, and the government unveiled a permanent joint council to promote investment, as well as trade insurance to cover infrastructure related exports and loans.^{9,10}

- **Agenda-setting.** Japan hosts TICAD to elevate and reinforce its broader foreign policy goals. There was thematic continuity between Japan’s focus on innovation and technology at TICAD and its leadership at the G20, where data governance topped the agenda.¹¹ In fact, there was an official session at TICAD dedicated to “Science, Technology, and Innovation and Digital Transformation.” In the past, scholars have noted that Tokyo tends to connect the TICAD process with its support for continental initiatives and Japan’s global priorities.¹² Japan International Cooperation Agency Senior Vice President Hiroshi Kato confirmed that TICAD is a platform to “sell ideas to partners.”¹³

TICAD: A HISTORY

When TICAD started in 1993, it was an opportunity to reset its relations with the continent and signal its intention to step up as a leader on the world stage. Japan had previously faced criticism for its support to some of Africa's autocrats and to the apartheid regime in South Africa;¹⁴ in fact, its trade with South Africa was so important to Pretoria that Japanese citizens were accorded "honorary white status."¹⁵ As several countries in the region restored multiparty politics and South Africa transitioned to a multiracial democracy, Japan envisioned TICAD as a venue to renew its ties with the continent. Similarly, Tokyo viewed TICAD as an attractive stage to assert itself as a global leader following the end of the Cold War. Its impressive economic growth in particular enabled Japan to champion official development assistance (ODA). Indeed, Japan provided more ODA to Africa than to any other region outside of Asia. At the first TICAD, the Japanese government stated that its main objective was to demonstrate the solidarity and support of the international community to Africa.

Following TICAD III in 2003, the Japanese government came under pressure to adjust the forum's approach. Many observers dismissed it as a "talk shop" or "diplomatic jamboree" that seemed wasteful during a period of economic stagnation in Japan.^{16,17} In addition, African leaders, including then-president John Kufour of Ghana, argued TICAD lacked a "concrete instructional structure and machinery."¹⁸ Finally, China, India, and other countries started hosting their own summits, which resulted in greater competition over participation and significant deliverables.

The Japanese government consequently initiated a pivot to elevate economic growth as a priority and introduced a mechanism for monitoring commitments at TICAD IV in 2008. It added the African Union as an official partner in 2010 and further emphasized public-private partnerships at TICAD V in 2012. Presumably in response to pressure from China's Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Tokyo committed to alternating its conference between Japan and Africa and moved from a five-year to a three-year cycle. It hosted TICAD VI in 2016 in Nairobi, Kenya.

UNDER PRESSURE TO STEP UP ITS GAME AND COMPETE WITH BEIJING

During the past decade, TICAD has reinvented itself in response to a shifting orthodoxy on aid and the return of geopolitical competition. TICAD has pivoted from a forum which championed official development assistance in a multilateral setting to an event that promotes private-sector and bilateral ties. Japan's earlier emphasis on development assistance was increasingly discordant with the "trade, not aid" approach and large-scale debt relief in 2005. Japanese officials presumably agreed with one scholar's view that "doubling the amount of ODA (official development assistance) won't attract Africa's interest anymore."¹⁹ Recent TICAD summits have consequently elevated trade and investment, prioritizing economic growth over traditional development assistance.²⁰ This transition also answered demands from the private sector: 76 percent of Japanese companies in Africa have asked for more support from the government, according to the latest survey by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO).²¹

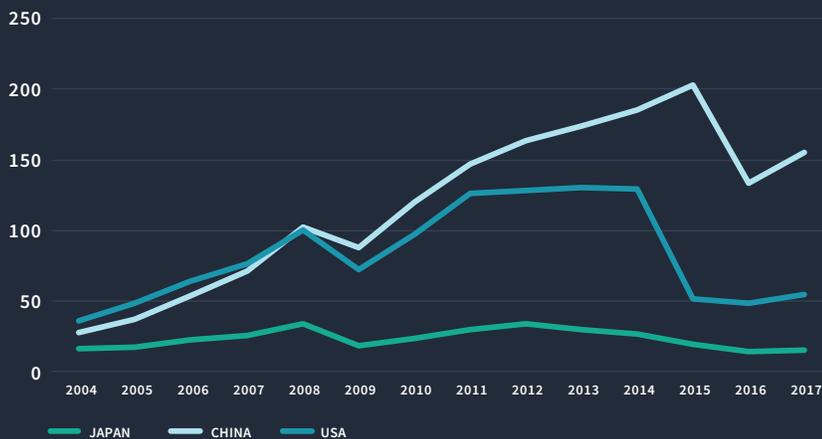
More importantly, Japan has rebranded TICAD because it faces increased competition from China and other countries for leadership and influence in sub-Saharan Africa. During the recent summit, China was the elephant in the room. While TICAD was once one of the preeminent summits with Africa, it is increasingly overshadowed by China's FOCAC, as well as Indian and EU summits. In addition, Japan's private sector is losing ground to Chinese companies and other foreign businesses. Japan's overall trade with Africa is just a fraction of Africa's trade with China. According to data compiled by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Japan's exports to the continent totaled \$7.8 billion in 2017, while imports were \$8.7 billion.²² Japan is not just falling behind to China; according to the *Financial Times*, Japan is now sub-Saharan Africa's sixth largest trading partner, following India and the United Arab Emirates.²³ The reality of Japan's declining economic and diplomatic position is almost certainly a driver of some of TICAD's changes.

TICAD AND THE VALUE OF SUMMITRY

TICAD's seventh edition presents an opportunity to assess the utility of regional summits, specifically during a period of great power competition. Moreover, Japan's model underscores some of the differences between forums hosted by democracies and those led by autocracies such as China and Russia.

Based on a literature review, interviews, and firsthand observations from TICAD, it is possible to separate the strengths of regional summits into six bins.

AFRICA'S BILATERAL TRADE WITH CHINA, JAPAN, AND THE UNITED STATES (in billions of USD)



U.N. Comtrade; SAIS-CARI

- **A Venue for Whole-of-Government Engagement.**

Summits enable diplomacy on steroids. Whereas most world leaders meet with two to three African counterparts a year, an event such as TICAD facilitates dozens of interactions between coequals. Prime Minister Abe, for example, met one-on-one with more than 40 African leaders or senior officials, including Commission Chair Moussa Faki of the African Union.²⁴ In addition, Japanese cabinet members and agency heads conducted their own bilateral meetings or chaired TICAD sessions. In the span of three days, Japan—often described by academics as psychologically and physically distant from Africa—primarily focused on growing its ties with the continent.²⁵

- **A Platform to Hype Government Initiatives.**

Regional forums provide governments with a megaphone to promote priority initiatives and unveil new programs. In addition to the permanent joint council and trade insurance, Japan used TICAD to highlight its Smallholder Horticulture Empowerment (SHEP) program, Coalition for African Development (CARD), and African Clean Cities Platform (ACCP), among other initiatives. Similarly, the government reiterated its vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and commitment to UN Security Council reform.²⁶

- **A Marketplace to Promote Business.**

International conferences play a catalytic role in fostering business-to-business ties. While deals develop year-round, governments have an incentive to fast-track an agreement as a summit deliverable. Consistent with

Prime Minister Abe's pledge to support the "power of Japanese private investment," there were multiple events led by JETRO and the business community, including a session for Japanese and African start-ups to pitch their companies.²⁷ These engagements also address some of the real and perceived risks of investing in Africa.²⁸ A Kenyan official, reflecting on TICAD VI in Nairobi, told the *Financial Times* that Japanese CEOs were "surprised that Africa had made so much progress and so we're now seeing an increasing awareness and interest."²⁹

- **A Pulpit for Foreign Policy Values.**

Summits offer several opportunities for the host government to defend its engagement, define its values, and

distinguish its approach from competitors. In recent TICADs, Japanese officials have tried to differentiate their approach from China. At TICAD VII, for instance, Prime Minister Abe explained that Japan offers a partnership "that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion."³⁰ One Nigerian newspaper concurred, noting that African leaders have a lot of lessons to learn from Japan.³¹ While not explicitly criticizing China, Japanese officials this year discussed Japan's high-quality infrastructure and warned about unsustainable debt. Abe, for instance, stated that "if partner countries are deeply in debt, it interferes with everyone's efforts to enter the market."³²

- **A Bridge to Past and Future Events.** Regional events provide an opening for governments to echo recent diplomatic summits and preview upcoming conferences or sporting events. Japanese officials noted that TICAD's agenda this year was in part based on the outcomes of the G20 and World Assembly of Women, both of which were hosted by Japan. As part of TICAD, Japan also showcased its "Host Town Initiative" between local Japanese governments and African countries ahead of the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. This pairing of past, present, and future events at TICAD enabled the Japanese government to present its engagement with Africa as sustained and enduring.

- **A Magnet for Side Events.** International conferences serve as force-multipliers, attracting additional

high-level participants and prestigious side events. In contrast to China's FOCAC, Japan's looser format created more opportunities for engagement between African governments, businesses, academics, and citizens. TICAD opened its doors to international organizations, NGOs, African embassies, and foreign businesses to stage more than 150 seminars and symposiums concurrent with the official program. Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance used TICAD to launch its third replenishment drive.³³ Plus, the UN Secretary General António Guterres and other high-profile dignitaries, including government representatives from the United States, Europe, and Asia, attended the sessions.

However, TICAD also reveals some of the drawbacks of regional summitry. While once a prototype for these events, TICAD has been eclipsed by China's FOCAC and is consistently under pressure to match the Chinese forum's flashy headlines and high-profile attendance. TICAD's last offering underscored three main shortcomings to hosting regional events with African leaders.

- **An Unflattering Mirror.** Summits tend to put a country's relationship with the continent under the microscope, often dwelling on the more negative aspects. The media coverage of TICAD never failed to highlight how Japan's trade and investment with the region was limited and had declined compared to other competitors. One African academic told the *South China Morning Post* that Japan's trade with Africa is "not only relatively small but it is even shrinking."³⁴
- **Unwanted Comparisons.** International conferences are usually framed by the media in the context of geopolitical competition, often distorting perceptions of the event and downplaying a summit's main objectives. Japanese and international media assaulted readers with headlines about Japan's competition with China; the *Washington Post*, for instance, wrote "With one eye on China, Japan vows to expand its engagement in Africa."³⁵ Columnist Pesek was blunt: "compared to the \$60 billion China's Xi Jinping is deploying, along with another \$10 billion from mainland [Chinese] companies, Japan remains a laggard."³⁶
- **Unmanageable Expectations.** Reoccurring summits tend to raise expectations for continued high-level engagement and ever-increasing pledges of financial assistance. This year, Abe refrained from unveiling a new pledge of support following TICAD VI's promise of \$30 billion. In fact, Japanese media reported that the foreign ministry had to alter how it measured

investment, from using a net basis to a gross basis, to credibly say Tokyo met its \$30 billion target. While there is great enthusiasm that TICAD will boost trade and investment, scholar Cobus van Staden warned that it remains to be seen how impactful that will be.³⁷

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN JAPAN, THE UNITED STATES, AND AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS

Japan's recent initiatives, including a permanent joint council and trade insurance to cover infrastructure related exports and loans, closely aligns with African priorities and U.S. policy in sub-Saharan Africa. Below are four areas of convergence.

- **Improving the Business Environment.** Tokyo, Washington, and African capitals share an interest in increasing trade and investment. The U.S. government, through its "Prosper Africa" initiative, is focused on significantly increasing two-way trade by coordinating government resources more effectively and working with African governments to remove regulatory and logistical trade barriers. This approach, especially harnessing private-sector investment, was a prominent theme at TICAD. It also mirrors efforts by several African governments to reform their scores on the World Bank's Doing Business rankings. In fact, for the sixth year in a row, sub-Saharan Africa leads with the highest number of business regulatory reforms.
- **Strengthening Self-Reliance.** USAID's "Journey to Self-Reliance," which seeks to build a country's capacity to plan, finance, and implement solutions to development challenges, matches initiatives championed by some African governments and Japan. Ghanaian president Nana Akufo-Addo, for example, is committed to a "Ghana Beyond Aid." Japan has long focused on human resource development. Senior Vice President Hiroshi Kato of JICA emphasized in 2017 the "importance of nurturing people's practice and creative problem-solving capacity."³⁸
- **Addressing Demographic Challenges.** At an event at CSIS, USAID Africa Bureau Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator Ramsey Day, highlighted the similarities between the U.S. government's

Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) and Japan's Africa Business Education Initiative for Youth (ABE initiative). At TICAD, the African Union joined forces with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) to launch an initiative to accelerate youth employment in agriculture. The African Union also has a youth volunteer service corps, which was established in 2010.

- **Promoting Science, Technology, and Innovation.** Japan, the United States, and African counterparts have all prioritized digital innovation and STEM education. At TICAD, there were a series of official and side events dedicated to the topic. Several U.S. departments and agencies are working to increase investment and address gaps in digital access and affordability. The U.S. Trade and Development Agency, for instance, in June unveiled its "Access Africa" partnership, which aims to support the development of quality information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure. African leaders, such as Rwandan president Paul Kagame, have made developing the ICT sector a top priority.

THE CASE FOR REVIVING THE U.S.-AFRICA LEADERS SUMMIT

Japan's experience with seven TICAD conferences underscores the advantages of regional summitry. While not without its criticism and costs, Japan's commitment to regularly host African leaders and adjust its approach in response to new geopolitical pressures is a model for the United States to emulate. In 2014, the United States convened its first and only regional summit with African leaders. Like TICAD, it attracted a large number of African leaders and inspired a dizzying array of side events, from investment forums to an after-party hosted by the ONE foundation.³⁹ The event garnered \$37 billion in

commitments, launched new initiatives, and elevated U.S. engagement with Africa's next generation of leaders. In fact, it was the single biggest engagement of any U.S. president with African leaders in history. Former special assistant to the president and senior director for African affairs at the National Security Council Grant Harris explained that the summit, especially the CEO forum, was meant to "showcase economic opportunities across the continent and propel deals between American and African companies." More broadly, he said the summit was "an incredible opportunity to make and lock-in commitments on issues from good governance and security to electricity access and support for young leaders."⁴⁰

The U.S. government has an opportunity to restart the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, showcasing new policy initiatives and renewing its commitment to engaging the region. It is important that the event includes themes that align with the president's style of engagement instead of simply replicating a format that was tailored for President Obama. The White House also should set aside resources, designate a "czar" to lead the process, and map out a yearlong plan to ensure a successful event. As former assistant secretary of state for African affairs Johnnie Carson explained in 2016, the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit was a high point, and it is crucial that the summit "does not become a one-off event."⁴¹ ■

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