

Japan and the African Development Bank

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Abstract

Africa has been a target of influence by major powers throughout history. In this paper, we investigate sway over Africa's foremost international financial institution: the African Development Bank (AfDB). We focus on the two largest non-regional shareholders, the United States and Japan. Analyzing panel data of AfDB loans from 1995-2015, we find that increases in Japanese bilateral aid and trade, as well as voting with Japan at the United Nations, are associated with larger AfDB commitments. We do not uncover similar patterns for the United States. Interview evidence suggests that Japan's imperial past and lack of historical ties with Africa encourage a quiet yet persuasive engagement with the institution, which furthers the country's economic and political aims on the continent. Our results advance the view that historical legacies shape the ways in which countries choose to employ international organizations to pursue their interests.

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1 Introduction

Who has power in Africa? Though they sometimes try to hide it in a post-colonial world, major powers—from the United Kingdom and France to the United States and the Soviet Union—have targeted the African region throughout history. More recently, China has gained a foothold on the continent, expanding its influence through trade and development aid.¹ Often overlooked—perhaps precisely because its historical legacy privileges obfuscated means of exercising power—Japan has also pursued influence in Africa (Nester, 1991; Rose, 2012; Raposo, 2013; Adem, 2001; Lumumba-Kasongo, 2010).

This paper investigates the exercise of power through one of the most important international institutions in the region: the African Development Bank (AfDB). The financial resources of Africa’s only AAA-rated financial institution are second only to the World Bank on the continent. This also makes the AfDB the only African institution that is a top ten donor among both multilateral and bilateral donors in the region (OECD, 2019).²

A rich literature in international relations has explored power dynamics within similar global and regional financial institutions. Scholars have shown that lending patterns to low and middle-income countries reflect the interests of the major shareholders at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (AsDB), and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).³

Most work on political influence over these international financial institutions focuses on the power of the United States.⁴ If the AfDB is susceptible to external influence, perhaps the largest non-regional shareholder—the United States—would indeed exert the most control here too. But, the United States has several alternative avenues of influence in the region where its voice is more powerful. Often not shy about using overt avenues of influence,

¹See Humphrey and Michaelowa (2019); Tull (2006); Zeitz (2019); Pehnelt (2016); Rotberg (2009); Samy (2010); Tan-Mullins, Mohan and Power (2010); Fijalkowski (2011); Guillon and Mathonnat (2020); Alden and Alves (2009); Dreher, Fuchs, Parks, Strange and Tierney (2022).

²The AfDB has the most resources among Africa’s six multilateral development banks (Humphrey, 2019). In 2012, when the World Bank lent 4.3 billion for infrastructure financing, the AfDB provided 2.6 billion, with the two MDBs accounting for about 70 percent of the total official development financing portfolio (Gutman, Sy and Chattopadhyay, 2015, 24). Like the World Bank, the AfDB has consistently outperformed other international financial institutions in terms of development effectiveness (Pipa, Seidel and Conroy, 2018, 20-22).

³For global hegemony, see Stone (2004); Dreher, Nunnenkamp and Thiele (2011); Dreher and Sturm (2012); Dreher, Nunnenkamp and Thiele (2008); Fleck and Kilby (2006); Harrigan, Wang and El-Said (2006); Andersen, Hansen and Markussen (2006); Kilby (2009). For regional hegemony, see Kilby (2006, 2011); Bland and Kilby (2012); Lim and Vreeland (2013); Ben-Artzi (2016).

⁴For the United States and the World Bank/IMF, see Stone (2004), Stone (2011), Dreher and Sturm (2012), Dreher, Nunnenkamp and Thiele (2008). For the IADB, see Bland and Kilby (2012). For the AsDB, see Kilby (2011). For an important early exception that looks beyond the United States, see Copelovitch (2010*a,b*).

the United States uses bilateral foreign aid to pressure African governments to support its foreign policy preferences (Miles, 2012; Blair, Marty and Roessler, 2022). When seeking subtler avenues of influence, the United States can also launder its dirty work by going through international organizations where it enjoys the top position of power, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Vaubel, 1986; Abbott and Snidal, 1998).

Perhaps because of a focus on the United States, scholars have argued that the AfDB is unlike other MDBs and has, so far, been insulated from external political influence. Ben-Artzi (2016, 153), for example, concludes that compared to other MDBs, the “AfDB appears to be the most independent of hegemonic influence.” Mingst (1990, 182) similarly suggests that political factors have been “less significant” at the AfDB relative to other MDBs.⁵ Yet, maybe the focus of study has been on the wrong shareholder. If one looks beyond the United States, another shareholder may have more reason to use its power at the AfDB to exert influence in Africa while flying below the radar of the casual observer.

Japan may demure from exercising the conspicuous disposition of power. The AfDB’s second-largest non-regional shareholder, Japan’s imperial legacy in the run up to, and during, World War II leaves the country hindered in international affairs. Accordingly, Japanese governments often eschew overt political influence through bilateral pressure (Curtis, 1993; Edstrom, 1999; Tamaki, 2020; Yasutomo, 1993; Rapkin, Elston and Strand, 1997; Kim, 2004; Miyashita, 2001*b*; Drifte, 2000; Ueki, 1993; Green, 2001). Scholars have thus argued that Japan, because of its history, is especially tempted to obfuscate its exercise of power by leveraging its position within international institutions (Davis, 2023).⁶ Perhaps when pursuing its self-interest, Japan has a unique preference for multilateralism.

Yet, Japan does not enjoy the same level of power as the United States in all international organizations (IOs). It has been the second most powerful shareholder at the IMF and the World Bank for decades, but these Washington, DC-based institutions seem more susceptible to the influence of the United States and its European allies (Copelovitch, 2010*b*; Stone, 2011). Dissatisfied with Asian influence at these Bretton Woods institutions during the East Asian Financial Crisis, Japan even actively sought alternative multilateral options to pursue its interests (Lipsky, 2003).

Where Japan does enjoy power, the government seems to have used it to exercise influence in foreign affairs in discreet ways. At the Asian Development Bank, where Japan has equal

⁵For an analysis of US voting power at the AfDB, see also Strand (2001).

⁶There has been some evidence that Japan uses bilateral aid strategically (Vreeland and Dreher, 2014, 150-151), but the preferred option is through less visible, multilateral means. The foreign policies of other major powers have also been affected in this way by their history. See, for example, Dreher, Nunnenkamp and Schmaljohann (2015).

voting power to the United States and where the presidency has always been filled by a former Japanese government official, the country appears to have favored countries that are politically important to Japan’s foreign policy agenda (Kilby, 2006, 2011; Lim and Vreeland, 2013). At the International Whaling Commission, a similar strategy has been pursued, with Japan lobbying for changes in the rules, and sometimes using bilateral aid inducements to gain votes in support of its cultural and commercial preferences regarding whaling (Miller and Dolšak, 2007; Strand and Tuman, 2012; Davis, 2023, 248).

The AfDB offers Japan further opportunities to pursue its global interests. For a post-war Japan that has sought to legitimise itself in international affairs and has “embraced the United Nations as a central pillar of global governance,” Africa is a strategically important region (Er, 2020, 37; Cornelissen, 2004, 116-135; Lumumba-Kasongo, 2010, 203; Raposo, 2013, 30). Because Africa carries great weight in terms of its abundance of votes in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), any country seeking legitimacy in foreign affairs through the institution must secure political support within the continent (Voeten, 2013; Nyangoni, 1985; Mickler and Pijović, 2020). The African region is also economically important to Japan in so far as it opens up new markets for Japanese businesses. As scholars have already suggested, Japan has interests in Africa’s raw materials (Adem, 2001, 64) and other energy resources (Cornelissen, 2004, 117).

Unlike important European countries, Japan has no historic ties to the region that date back to the colonial or pre-colonial eras.⁷ And unlike the United States, the Soviet Union, and, these days, China, Japan cannot afford to overtly pressure African countries for their political support because of the shameful record it established with its own foreign policies in the run up to, and during, World War II.⁸ We thus suspect that Japan has good reason to pursue its foreign policy interests in a hidden manner, through its power at the AfDB.

So, while the United States might have more formal power at the AfDB, it also enjoys several preferable alternative options to pursue its interests in Africa. Japan has nearly as much formal power at the AfDB, and its history leaves it only with less desirable choices. As such, Japan may serve as an archetype for the kind of laundering of dirty politics that so many scholars have suggested as a purpose of international organizations (Vaubel, 1986, 48-51; Abbott and Snidal, 1998, 18-19; Stone, 2004; Lim and Vreeland, 2013, 36; Kersting and Kilby, 2019; Dreher, Lang, Rosendorff and Vreeland, 2022).

We take a two-pronged approach to evaluating our conjecture. First, we turn to quantitative data. We test for the relative political influence of the two major global powers with

⁷In contrast to its historical record in Asia. See Ogura (2003); Weiss (2014). Morikawa (1985) has suggested that Japan had exploitative relationships with Africa, through economic engagement and support for apartheid South Africa, but Japan did not have any colonial relationship.

⁸Beal, Nozaki and Yang (2001); Weber (2018); Hundt and Bleiker (2007); Rosenbluth and Thies (2010).

the highest voting shares and permanent board seats at the AfDB, the United States and Japan. We analyse total funding commitments to fifty-two African countries between 1995 and 2015 and establish a robust, statistically significant and positive association between Japanese interests and the size of AfDB commitments. We show that Japanese bilateral aid commitments, trade with Japan, and voting with Japan at the UNGA are associated with larger funding commitments from the AfDB. We do not find the same patterns regarding similar measures of US interests.

We also rely on interview evidence to clarify why and how Japan leverages its influence at the AfDB.⁹ We highlight two important qualitative findings. First, Japan’s lack of historical ties with African countries allows the Asian power to present itself as a more neutral partner in African development relative to other powerful shareholders, even if it might have more self-interested political goals.¹⁰ Second, Japan’s preference for multilateralism has encouraged its more active engagement with the AfDB relative to the United States, a strategy that positions it to better obfuscate its pursuit of political goals in the African Bank.¹¹ Following Japanese scholars such as Arase (1995) and Yasutomo (1993), we attribute this multilateral engagement to its imperial past, which privileges hidden means of exercising power in international affairs.¹²

Our paper thus provides evidence supporting the contentions of Vaubel (1986) and Abbott and Snidal (1998) about the laundering function of international organizations. Furthermore, our paper nicely complements Dreher, Lang, Rosendorff and Vreeland (2022), who focus on the decision of a powerful country (the United States) to use overt influence with some countries, and clandestine influence with others. Here, we turn the question around, asking which powerful countries are more reliant on the use of clandestine strategies. We suggest the importance of a historical legacy in the choice made by a global power to use international organizations to exercise influence, following Green (2001).

Japan’s approach appears successful. Controversy surrounds the influence of most great powers in Africa. Europe is critiqued for continuing to build on its old colonial ties (Taylor, 2019; Omeje, 2021). The United States has been branded a neo-imperial power (Keenan, 2010). And China now fills headlines for overstepping with its assistance, creating new

⁹Between April and June 2023, we conducted in-depth interviews with three AfDB executive directors, one senior director at the AfDB and one AfDB official. We explain and justify our interview strategy in a subsequent section and present summaries of these interviews in Appendix D. Interviewees are given a unique alphabetical identifier. Where a direct quote or reference is made, it is accompanied by the relevant identifier.

¹⁰Interview A, Interview B and Interview C in Appendix D.

¹¹Interview A.

¹²While the focus of our paper is on Japan and its influence compared to that of the United States, we briefly discuss Germany, France, the United Kingdom, as well as China in Section 6.

relationships of dependency (Carmody, 2020; Al-Fadhat and Prasetyo, 2022; Taylor, 2014). All the while, Japan has quietly exerted political influence through the AfDB. The country has used a “laundering” approach to obfuscate its actions—a general approach that scholars have described for decades. And Japan has implemented the technique so well that even many of those very scholars have not noticed.

2 Overview of the African Development Bank

The African Development Bank was established in 1964 after a signatory agreement between twenty-two, mostly newly-independent, African countries (Fordwor, 1981, 2). Currently Africa’s leading international financial institution, it has a broad mandate to contribute to the sustainable economic development and progress of its borrowing members.¹³

Unlike the other major MDBs, the AfDB was deliberately created without US assistance (Ben-Artzi, 2016; Krasner, 1981; Strand, 2001). Amidst the waves of decolonisation on the continent, African states wanted to take ownership of their own economic development interests without any external influence (Mingst, 1990; Kraemer-Mbula, 2021). The AfDB’s distinctly African identity was bolstered not only by its headquarters’ location (Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire), but also its African president, African staff, and exclusively African membership (Fordwor, 1981).

The political benefits of exclusively African ownership were overshadowed, however, by a lack of economic benefits. The AfDB’s donors, which were also its borrowers, were high-risk, low-income African economies with poor credit ratings. This limited the AfDB’s initial access to callable capital as well as financial resources from international capital markets.¹⁴ Just three years after it was established, the AfDB began to restrict funding to larger projects (Kraemer-Mbula, 2021, 63).

For the first time in the AfDB’s history, non-members, including Japan and the United States, were invited to contribute financial resources.¹⁵ In 1974, the AfDB launched the African Development Fund (ADF) as a *donor*-funded concessional lending window (Krasner, 1981, 323).¹⁶ With their finance, came the potential for political influence. The ADF was set up with a twelve-member Executive Board, half of which represents African countries while the other half represents non-regional countries. This arrangement afforded non-regional

¹³Africa has the most development banks of any region, with six in total (Humphrey, 2019).

¹⁴MDBs have a portion of capital that each member country commits as a guarantee should the MDB ever need it but does not actually pay this capital in cash (‘callable capital’). For a discussion on the impact of callable capital on an MDB’s ability to finance projects, see Humphrey (2014).

¹⁵It took the United States a few years before it formally joined the ADF (Fordwor, 1981, 108).

¹⁶The ADF was formally created after an initial signatory agreement in 1972 (Fordwor, 1981, 11-12).

countries equal voting power to African countries on its executive board and a considerable degree of control over the concessional funds that most, if not all, African countries relied on. Still, non-regional influence was limited to the ADF, not the AfDB as a whole.

The expansion represented a financial success. The ADF was initially replenished with contributions totalling \$87 billion from thirteen non-regional countries plus the AfDB itself (Upton, 2000, 9; Kraemer-Mbula, 2021, 64). This substantially increased the resources of the AfDB as a whole. Between 1966 and 1975, the AfDB approved only 312 loans, but within the same time span from the launch of the ADF, it approved nearly 1,400 loans—an increase of over 300 percent (Kraemer-Mbula, 2021, 64).

Yet, the reality of limited capital resources persisted even after the establishment of the ADF. Pressure mounted to admit non-regional countries to the AfDB with full voting rights. Such a shift had been resisted throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and the change ultimately required four years of negotiation among African member countries. According to the AfDB president who negotiated the entry of non-African members, some countries were particularly opposed to expansion due to concerns related to external influence over the AfDB’s affairs and the loss of the AfDB’s “African character” (Fordwor, 1981, 118).

But ultimately, the 1982 move to fully admit non-African countries, like Japan and the United States, proved beneficial for the AfDB’s balance sheet. Authorised capital increased from \$6.3 billion in 1983 to over \$20 billion in 1987 (Babb, 2009). When the AfDB’s balance sheet was deteriorating in the 1990s due to borrowers entering arrears, it was the non-African members that came to the African Bank’s rescue (Bazbauers and Engel, 2021, 107). The new injection of liquidity did not come without stipulations. The Articles of Agreement were revised to grant non-regional members a greater voice at Africa’s Bank, which weakened African control of the institution (Strand, 2001).¹⁷

At the AfDB executive board where lending decisions are made, Nigeria has since remained the largest shareholder, but is followed by the United States and Japan. At the ADF board, the AfDB is collectively represented by African shareholders with fifty percent of the votes. The next largest shareholders are the United States and Japan.¹⁸ Only the United States has its own single constituency represented by an American executive director. However, by virtue of its large shareholding, Japan also enjoys a permanent seat on the AfDB and ADF executive boards (Shaw, 1991).¹⁹

¹⁷The voting power of non-African members at the AfDB was increased from 33% to 40%.

¹⁸Japan has sometimes acquired more votes than the United States. In more recent years (especially since 2021), Germany has been displaced either Japan or the United States as a top shareholder.

¹⁹Table 1 in Appendix A provides a full list of AfDB constituencies.

3 Background on the politics of AfDB lending

Lending decisions at multilateral financial institutions can be influenced by politics. Existing scholarship presents convincing evidence, for example, that countries politically important to the United States receive favorable treatment from the IMF and the World Bank (Rowlands, 1995; Thacker, 1999; Fleck and Kilby, 2001; Oatley and Yackee, 2004; Barro and Lee, 2005; Harrigan, Wang and El-Said, 2006; Dreher and Jensen, 2007; Dreher, Sturm and Vreeland, 2009; Clark and Dolan, 2021). This influence has also been found to extend to the rest of the G5 member countries (Joyce, 2004; Copelovitch, 2010*a*; Dreher and Lang, 2016), specifically with regard to Africa (Stone, 2004; Vreeland and Dreher, 2014, 163-174).

At the African Bank, globally powerful countries face a unique situation because none of them is the top shareholder. Consider the United States. In comparison to other MDBs, the United States holds a “unique” status at the AfDB because of its “minority voting rights,” “lack of veto power,” and “limited control over resources at the bank”— all of which limit its structural power (Shaw, 1991, 553).

Anecdotally, there are several instances one can point to where the United States failed to sway AfDB lending operations. In 1988, for example, the United States objected to providing a policy-based loan to the Democratic Republic of the Congo owing to concerns over the monitoring and enforcement of the strict policy reforms it required. The United States was also concerned about the speed of disbursements. Despite US objection, the loan request was approved (Shaw, 1991, 544).

As another example, in 1989, when the AfDB was considering a soybean loan to Côte d’Ivoire, the United States again expressed concerns. The loan was meant to help introduce the cultivation of soybeans to a very fragile part of the country, but the United States felt that the project was not viable and might lead to desertification. According to the former US Executive Director, Donald Sherk, the United States “had enough votes against that loan to kill it, until the president of the country got on the phone and called every head of state in Africa and said, I want you to instruct your executive directors to support this loan. And so, they came in the next day and changed their vote” (US Policy on AfDB, 2001, 66).

Between 1992 and 1995, the United States also unsuccessfully attempted to “block 11 [AfDB] loans, worth \$953 million, based on economic and financial concerns” (United States General Accounting Office, 1995, 27). More recently, in 2018, the Board of Governors “decided to commence negotiations on the AfDB’s capital needs,” despite US objection (Malpass, 2018).

Those who have examined the AfDB more rigorously find a lack of convincing empirical evidence of systematic US influence. Ben-Artzi (2016, 156) considers affinity, defined as “the

extent of borrowing countries’ support of the United States in voting at the UN General Assembly,” as an independent variable to explain AfDB loans per capita. She finds that affinity with the United States is actually *negatively* associated with AfDB loans. African countries that voted alongside the United States were likely to receive smaller amounts of AfDB loans than those that voted opposite the United States. Ben-Artzi (2016, 176) argues that the results demonstrate the AfDB’s relative independence from US hegemony.

Along the same lines, Obydenkova and Rodrigues Vieira (2020) find that borrowing members in the AfDB tend to vote differently from the United States in the UNGA. They suggest that the top shareholders, like Nigeria and South Africa, dilute the effects of American influence (Obydenkova and Rodrigues Vieira, 2020, 21, 23). This is consistent with the studies of Vreeland and Dreher (2014, 174), who show that US military assistance has no systematic association with ADF disbursements, and Jung and Kim (2022), who show that there is no statistically significant correlation between US bilateral aid and AfDB loans.

To be clear, we do not theorise that the United States is powerless at the AfDB—it is, after all, the largest non-regional shareholder at the institution and its executive director stands alone as the only board member who represents the interests of just one government (Babb, 2009, 137; Park, 2023). But acting through international organizations requires political capital. Considering its hindered political position at the AfDB and the alternative avenues of influence it enjoys, the opportunity cost of expending the political capital to push the AfDB towards all US foreign policy goals may not be worth it.

We argue that it is precisely because of alternative channels of influence in the face of institutional limitations at the AfDB that the United States does not engage more extensively with the AfDB and instead uses its membership as a way “to be seen in Africa as a supporter of African institutions” (Copson, 2000, 6). At the World Bank and the IMF, the United States possesses considerably more voting power and has not been shy to exercise this power over other countries to pursue its interests, including buying friends and rewarding allies (Stone, 2004; Dreher, Lang, Rosendorff and Vreeland, 2022).

Beyond these multilateral channels, the United States can overtly influence African countries through bilateral channels. In fact, this is a strategy it has used throughout history—from the Cold War (Bermeo, 2011, 2017) to the War on Terror (Fleck and Kilby, 2010; Carbone, 2004; Owusu, 2007; Mawdsley, 2007)—and one that has helped the United States to establish long-standing relationships with its strategic allies in the region.

The upshot is that while the United States may have power at the AfDB, its relative standing is weaker there than it is in other international organizations. It has other, more attractive options to exercise power in Africa. This situation is different for a certain other major shareholder.

4 Japan and the AfDB

We focus on Japan, the AfDB’s second largest non-regional shareholder, because the country has a well-established preference for using international institutions to pursue foreign policy interests (Davis, 2023, 177-256)—and Japan has key political and economic interests in Africa. Officially, Japan pursues two major approaches to guide its economic relations with African countries: “quality growth” and “human security” (Government of Japan, 2023). We argue that Japan also pursues two sets of *political* goals, both of which are aimed at elevating the country’s status and legitimacy in international affairs.

The first goal is the use of its bilateral economic relations—both through trade and aid—to elevate Japan’s status as a “global partner” engaged in the “important issue” of economic development (Sakamoto, 2018, 24). The use of aid for this purpose was explicitly revealed in the ODA Charter by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan (2015). Essentially, Japan strives for complementarity between its own bilateral aid and multilateral loans from the AfDB. In an analysis of Japanese development assistance, Kodera (2016, 23) even suggests that, as “a latecomer to African development compared to the ex-colonial powers,” the decision to channel more aid through the AfDB was partly “a strategic choice” to elevate Japan’s status among the aid community in Africa.

Similarly, trade has been part of Japan’s official economic cooperation programme for Africa since the 1990s.²⁰ Cornelissen and Taylor (2000, 626) argue that Japan’s model for sustainable African development—what it wants the aid community to see as its contribution as a global partner—augments aid with increased trade and investment by Japanese companies. The 2008 Yokohama Declaration in fact “set out to boost investment and trade with African countries” and “provide market access to African goods” as part of Japan development efforts in Africa (Cornelissen, 2012, 464)

Importantly, this goal has positive externalities for Japan’s commercial interests. While Japanese development aid has sometimes been linked to Japanese business interests (Ensign, 1992), Nippon Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) has often called on the Japanese government to be more effective in its promotion of trade in Africa and in its efforts to help Japanese companies gain preferential access in African countries, both of which require the official support of African governments (Yamada, 2011, 323).

The second goal relates to Japan’s status at the United Nations. Japan is not a stranger to UN politics—from pursuing General Assembly membership in the early 1950s after being shut off following World War II to later seeking a permanent and non-permanent seat on the

²⁰Japan also relies on sub-Saharan Africa as an alternative supplier of imports of materials and energy (Adem, 2001, 64; Cornelissen, 2004, 117).

Security Council (Toshiya, 2007, 216; Er, 2020; Cornelissen, 2004). Obtaining the support of the African bloc at the UN, which commands over fifty votes, not only has “tremendous political significance,” but is something Japan “reminds” its diplomats to do (Morikawa, 2005, 488). As early as 1991, Japan had already served on the UNSC seven times—the most numerous of all members, with the success of its campaigns largely owing to the Afro-Asian bloc (Osada, 2002, 128; Cornelissen, 2004, 119).

We argue that Japan can use the AfDB to pursue both sets of goals. The country has often drawn the attention of IO scholars in part because of the centrality of IOs to Japanese foreign policy. This attention is not a mere reflection of Japan’s support for multilateral cooperation but is also a direct consequence of its imperial legacy in the run up to, and during, World War II (Yasutomo, 1993, 1995). In the war’s aftermath, Japanese government officials prioritised membership in international organizations to gain back acceptance and legitimacy in the international community. The foreign policy doctrine of former minister Yoshida Shigeru—the Yoshida doctrine—was characterised by this more low-key approach to international affairs (Yasutomo, 1993; Yasutomo, 1995; Ueki, 1993; Miyashita, 2001*a*; Miyashita, 2001*b*, 35; Edstrom, 1999.) Even with Japan’s economic rise in the 1980s, its quest for power and its pursuit of key political goals, tempered by its historical legacy, have often been channelled through multilateral institutions (Davis, 2023, 177-184).

There are distinct advantages that the multilateral African Bank offers Japan in the pursuit of its key goals. As international organizations, MDBs provide a cost-sharing arrangement for their member states (Abbott and Snidal, 1998, 13). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan (2015, 13) even acknowledges that working through regional development banks can allow Japanese aid to reach “sectors or regions that are less accessible in bilateral cooperation.” Japan, in engaging with the AfDB, can also leverage on the AfDB’s “expertise, impartiality and wide networks” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, 2015, 13).

Accordingly, Japan’s record of engagement with the AfDB appears stronger than that of other powerful countries. For example, the AfDB-US partnership has concluded only two agreements involving the US Agency for International Development (USAID). By contrast, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the AfDB routinely co-finance infrastructure development on the continent and provide financial support to both sovereign and private sector operations (AfDB, 2012). Japan also channels aid and loans via the AfDB much more so than does China (Raposo and Potter, 2010, 181).

Japan seems to be utilising the AfDB’s common resource pool and infrastructure to supplement the work of JICA and other agencies. Japan might want to “crowd in” AfDB funds so that they follow the direction of Japanese bilateral aid and elevate Japan’s status

as a global partner engaged in African development.²¹ The AfDB, for its part, may also choose to crowd in its financing in response to Japanese aid or trade if doing so would enable a greater chance of substantial co-financing, for example.²² Japanese aid and trade tied to building infrastructure can also lay the groundwork for lucrative business ventures by Japanese firms (Ensign, 1992), expanding opportunities for these firms to gain a foothold in the African region.

The other added advantage of the AfDB involves obfuscation. As suggested by Vaubel (1986) as well as by Abbott and Snidal (1998), international organizations can “launder” the “dirty work” of governments. Buying friends in the United Nations is not a goal a global power might want to make public, but multilateral channels can sufficiently offer political cover for this (see De Medeiros Carvalho, 2011, 325; Owada, 1998, 4-5).

Consider the example of the first Tokyo International Conference for African Development (TICAD) held in 1993. Ostensibly, the meeting was meant to highlight Japan’s proactive posture for sub-Saharan Africa’s development and position Japan as a major Asian power in Africa (Kodera, 2016, 77; Lehman, 2005, 427). Yet, many have argued that TICAD was largely informed by key foreign policy objectives unrelated to development, including Japan’s bid for a permanent seat on the UNSC, and support on votes, like elections to the UNSC (Morikawa, 1997, 206; Morikawa, 2005, 487; Hirano, 2012, 198; Nakamura, 2019, 10). Even Japan’s former Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and ambassador to Djibouti acknowledged that Japan “definitely” had in mind the political clout of the African bloc at the UNGA when it called for the first TICAD meeting (Ogura, 2003, 58).

TICAD is a triennial conference.²³ The AfDB, however, allows for repeated day-to-day interactions between Japanese officials resident in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, and African state representatives. It also allows for more frequent tangible rewards to be offered in the form of larger loans and grants. This should make it ideal for any global power to use their engagement with the institution to court the African bloc.

One possibility, which we examine more rigorously in the empirical analysis below, is that Japan uses the AfDB to engage in what Kaya, Kilby and Kay (2021, 2) call “supplementary multilateralism,” whereby “the multilateral setting reinforces existing bilateral ties.” The suggestion we make here is that Japan might use its engagement with the AfDB to facilitate loans for its “friends” at the United Nations. In the late 1980s, one Japanese employee at the AfDB indeed reported that Japan’s goals in Africa and at the AfDB amounted to “the long-term winning of friends” (Shaw, 1991, 545).

²¹On crowding in, see Jung and Kim (2022, 397). See also Cohen (2023).

²²The AfDB has often been open about its financial resources always being a “small fraction of Africa’s requirements” as well as its efforts for the wider use of “co-financing arrangements” (AfDB, 2013, 3).

²³Up until 2013, it was held every five years.

We suspect that achieving political goals through the AfDB might be easier—and less controversial—for Japan than for other global powers. In the absence of historical or colonial ties in Africa, Japan can be more easily perceived as a neutral partner, distributing development assistance according to country need (Orr, 1990, 94; Ishikawa, 1999, 2,37; Sakamoto, 2018, 24). Japan’s former Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, who also served as the country’s ambassador to Djibouti, Kazuo Ogura, has precisely suggested that “unlike the United States and Europe, Japan, having no debts to Africa from a history of colonial rule or the slave trade” saw its role as a “bridge-builder” for South-South cooperation involving African countries (Ogura, 2003, 59). So, even if it has more self-interested political goals, Japan is likely to benefit from its lack of historical baggage in the region because any power it actually wields at the AfDB can easily fly below the radar. We thus offer the following central argument to test: Countries that advance the political goals of Japan receive larger commitments from the AfDB.

5 Quantitative evidence

Our dataset covers the period between 1995 and 2015 and includes a maximum of fifty two African countries.²⁴ Our dependent variable measures total AfDB commitments based on data from the AfDB’s operations database.²⁵

In line with the stated political goals of Japan in Africa, we consider three measures in relation to Japan as our key independent variables. The first captures voting alignment on votes at the UNGA, extracted from Kersting and Kilby (2019). The UN alignment variable ranges from 0 (always voting the opposite) to 1 (always voting the same), reflecting the degree to which the recipient government’s UN voting record matches that of Japan.²⁶ We expect countries that align more with Japan at the UNGA to receive larger AfDB commitments.

²⁴The list of countries is provided in Appendix B.

²⁵We follow the approach of Vreeland and Dreher (2014, 148) and Bermeo (2017, 749) and use a natural logarithm (plus one) of the AfDB commitments and bilateral aid and trade variables. We log transform to reduce the influence of outlier observations and normalise, to an extent, the distribution of the variable. We use commitments because disbursements are typically used in studies of aid effectiveness while commitments are used to examine the motives of aid allocation or borrower demand (Humphrey and Michaelowa, 2013; Berthélemy, 2006).

²⁶The “UN alignment” variable is based on all UN votes that occurred in the previous 12 months. In Kersting and Kilby (2019) and Kersting and Kilby (2016), calculation of UN alignment ranges from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating perfect alignment. As the authors explain in earlier work focusing on US alignment, “we assign each vote a 1 if the government and the United States vote the same (treating abstentions and absences as equivalent), a 0 if the votes are opposite, and 1/2 if one party abstains/is absent while the other votes. UN Alignment is the average of these values over the 12 month period” (Kersting and Kilby, 2016, 157, fn. 12).

To be clear, we do not believe that AfDB staff are closely tracking and considering UN voting records of African states or Japan. We argue, instead, that Japanese officials at the AfDB and the various Japanese agencies partnering with the AfDB might be both formally and informally communicating their preferences with AfDB staff. Other scholarship has established that Japan uses its aid to reward countries for their political support in international affairs, which can be proxied by voting patterns at the UNGA (see, for example, Hoeffler and Sterck, 2022, 11).

Our second measure is bilateral aid commitments from the OECD database. The literature on politically-motivated foreign aid generally suggests that Japanese aid allocation can provide a good approximation of Japanese interests. It closely mirrors Japanese geopolitical interests, like support on the UNSC (Vreeland and Dreher, 2014, 157), and commercial interests, like expanding export markets, securing raw materials, and providing business for Japanese companies (Kilby, 2011, 232).²⁷ We similarly expect recipients of larger Japanese bilateral aid to be associated with larger AfDB commitments.

As a final measure, we introduce the value of Japan’s current trade flows with an African country. We do so for two reasons. First, because it serves as proxy for Japanese trade interests and broader commercial interests. Second, because, as Cornelissen and Taylor (2000, 626) suggest, Japan-Africa trade relations should be viewed as part of a “larger aid policy of Japan” that has explicit diplomatic and political goals in Africa, but can still be pursued with “an economic developmental purpose.”

We include equivalent measures for the United States in the analysis for comparison. Voting alignment with the United States in the UNGA, US bilateral aid, and US bilateral trade similarly capture how politically important African countries are to the United States (Stone, 2004; Kilby, 2011; Vreeland and Dreher, 2014; Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Fleck and Kilby, 2006).

We also include relevant control variables derived from the literature: population (logged), economic development measured by logged GDP per capita, life expectancy, and political regime type using the Polity IV dataset.²⁸ We follow the approach of Kilby (2011) and also include the country’s overall world trade to proxy for integration into the world economy. We lag all independent and control variables by 1 year. Table B2 in Appendix B provides a list of all variables and their sources.

²⁷Some scholars have also found that it may reflect Japanese humanitarian interests. See Tuman and Strand (2006); Tuman, Strand and Emmert (2009).

²⁸The variable capturing regime type considers whether and to what extent a country’s level of democracy might affect financing commitments from the AfDB. While democracy promotion is not part of the overarching objective of the AfDB, the organization has nevertheless emphasised the importance of good governance (AfDB, 1999; Hamdok, 2000).

We estimate the relationship between these variables and AfDB commitments using multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. In all models, we include both country and year fixed effects to control for the average differences across countries and across years in any observable or unobservable predictors. This means that our model estimates are based on within-country changes.

5.1 Findings

Table 1 reports our results. First, we estimate regressions with only the variables capturing Japanese interests. In Column [1], we find that being aligned with Japan’s political goals is associated with larger amounts of total AfDB commitments, with positive and statistically significant coefficients on UN voting, bilateral aid and bilateral trade.

In Column [2], we introduce control variables into the specification. Lending confidence to our models, most covariates are signed in the expected direction. Low income and large population are associated with larger total AfDB commitments—although only the variable capturing income per capita is statistically significant. The positive and statistically significant association between our variables capturing Japanese interests and total AfDB commitments also holds in this specification.

As Column [3] shows, we do not uncover a similar relationship between measures capturing US interests and total AfDB commitments. A country’s alignment with the United States on UNGA votes has a negative relationship with total AfDB commitments—although the association is not statistically significant. While the variables capturing US bilateral aid and US trade flows enter with a positive coefficient, they are not statistically significant either. In fact, when we introduce the control variables in Column [4], the estimated relationship between US trade flows and total AfDB commitments is actually negative.

When we jointly consider measures of Japanese and US interests in column [5], we find only evidence for Japanese influence. The associations are not as precisely estimated, which is not surprising considering the inclusion of the US variables, but the statistical significance holds at the 10 percent level of confidence for UN voting and at the 5 percent level for bilateral aid. Overall, the findings in this section suggest that there is a systematic and positive association between total AfDB commitments and measures of Japanese interests. When an African country is in a position to advance the political goals of Japan—by voting more with Japan, receiving more Japanese aid, or trading more with Japan than in the previous year—it is associated with larger total AfDB commitments.

Based on the data we employ here, it appears that the pursuit of Japanese interests in Africa has benefitted from the country’s engagement with the AfDB. We now turn to interview evidence to better understand the causal relationships that might be driving them.

6 Qualitative evidence

To supplement the data analysis, we undertook a series of in-depth interviews between February and June 2023 with AfDB regional and non-regional executive directors, an AfDB official familiar with AfDB-Japan relations, and one senior organizational staff member.²⁹ We find that while the United States might sometimes be much more assertive at the AfDB, Japan appears to be a “quiet” neutral partner, making strategic interventions through its direct bilateral engagement to pursue its political goals in Africa.

We focus on the insights from these high-level AfDB officials for two main reasons. First, we are specifically interested in donor influence. Executive directors and other government-appointed officials act as their country’s representatives and are well placed to provide insights into donor influence. Second, senior organizational staff members have a much broader understanding of the AfDB’s overall strategic direction and lead high-level dialogues at country and regional levels. A senior staff member is thus also well placed to provide insights into what drives the AfDB’s strategic priorities and internal operations.

We acknowledge that there are particular sensitivities related to elite interviews—from the power dynamics between interviewee and interviewer to the subjects’ use of persuasive and authoritative language. Government officials and AfDB leaders and staff have agendas and interviews should be interpreted with caution. For example, Humphrey and Michaelowa (2019, 21) suggest that development agency officials might be less likely to be open about factors driving their operations, especially if these factors contradict the agencies’ mandates of reducing poverty and facilitating economic development. They may be more likely to assume the role of the organization’s “spokesperson” when interviewed (Ostrander, 1993).

We followed the approach of Delaney (2007, 215) and Bunte (2019, 78-79) and treated the interviews as a learning opportunity, with our role as “status subordinates” allowing us to gain more insights from the interviewees. In our experience, the interviewees were quite open in discussing the internal workings of the AfDB and what (or who) influences lending operations.³⁰ Our participants had different backgrounds and years of experience at the AfDB, and we sought to triangulate information obtained from each elite subject.

²⁹See Appendix D.

³⁰This might be a reflection of the senior positions (with high levels of job security) that our interviewees occupy and in fact corresponds to the patterns identified by Sinclair and Brady (1987): interviewees that

Table 1: African Development Bank commitments

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Japan: UN voting	13.32** (5.964)	12.00* (6.712)			16.51* (9.679)
Japan: aid	0.251** (0.120)	0.331** (0.136)			0.308** (0.131)
Japan: trade	0.251*** (0.0870)	0.284* (0.162)			0.256 (0.160)
US: UN voting			-2.486 (3.374)	-2.496 (3.156)	3.904 (4.676)
US: aid			0.196 (0.130)	0.173 (0.149)	0.148 (0.149)
US: trade			0.0932 (0.138)	-0.562 (0.483)	-0.528 (0.475)
World trade		0.0771 (0.148)		0.806* (0.438)	0.569 (0.500)
Population		3.946 (5.777)		7.154 (5.476)	5.356 (5.723)
GDP per capita		-4.020** (1.748)		-4.170** (1.641)	-4.210** (1.696)
Life expectancy		0.119 (0.130)		0.129 (0.124)	0.103 (0.134)
Regime type		0.0772 (0.156)		0.118 (0.161)	0.0464 (0.152)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of countries	52	50	52	50	50
Observations	1040	956	1040	956	956
Adjusted R2	0.284	0.283	0.277	0.276	0.284

Note: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at country-level. * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

6.1 Interview-based findings

We structure our findings from the interviews to present two main themes that are of particular relevance and on which there was a considerable degree of correspondence and unanimity among interviewees. The first is the contrast between the disposition of the United States and Japan. The second is Japan’s more active bilateral engagement with the AfDB, a strategy that highlights Japan’s preference for multilateralism due to its historical legacy and concurrently positions the Asian power to better obfuscate its pursuit of political goals in the African Bank.

6.1.1 A neutral partner

Without exception, all interviewees were quick to stress that the AfDB “is Africa’s Bank”³¹ and that “it was different from any other MDB.”³² This indicated to us that the power that a non-regional member, like Japan, might wield at the AfDB, at least in terms of the suggestive evidence provided by our quantitative findings, might fly below the radar.

Every interviewee agreed that in terms of donor influence, the AfDB “is different [compared to the World Bank].”³³ As one non-regional executive director put it plainly, “this is not the World Bank. . . nobody calls the shots at the AfDB.”³⁴ Speaking more specifically about the United States, the director explained that, “the US cannot block, it cannot veto.” This accords with results from the statistical analysis above for the US variables.

Particularly relevant to substantiating and supporting our argument about Japan was the sentiment shared across the board about the disposition of the United States in contrast to Japan. The United States often cannot present itself as a neutral partner. Instead, because of congressional directives, the US executive director sometimes has to take a more activist position, being more overt about its desire to influence the AfDB’s operations. As one interviewee explained in detail:

The US has very strong foreign policy and sometimes, because of those policies, they are required by Congress to vote no on projects concerning certain countries and they will tell us, “sorry, this is a very good project but we have to vote no because that is what our Congress has mandated because we are not happy with

are higher in the hierarchy tend to provide more candid responses. It is possible that lower-level staff might be more reluctant to offer such candidness.

³¹Interview A, Interview B, Interview C, Interview D, Interview E.

³²Interview B, Interview C, Interview D, Interview E.

³³Interview D. All other interviewees expressed a similar sentiment.

³⁴Interview D.

the country in this area.” It will be noted that the US voted no, but the project will go through [because] nobody has a veto.³⁵

Japan, on the other hand, has a much more subtle disposition at the AfDB, which seems to give an impression of neutrality. As one interviewee put it, Japan “has no historical baggage” in Africa, unlike other globally powerful AfDB shareholders.³⁶ Its relatively clean slate in Africa enables Japan to position itself as a collaborative partner in African development.³⁷ More specifically, the lack of comparable historical legacies with other Western donors seems to have translated into a tendency to pair aid generosity with a distinctly low-key approach to the Japan-AfDB partnership. According to one African executive director, “[Japan] is not loud and is not dictating to anyone.”³⁸

Compared to the United States, we also found that Japan is the more likely donor country to provide strategic support to the African executive directors in controversial votes at the executive board, potentially earning the country some goodwill among the African members. Japan’s voice on the board benefits greatly from its representative permanently occupying the executive director seat of one of the largest and most stable voting groups.³⁹

Our interviews with the executive directors reveal that while most decisions on the board are made by consensus, some decisions are more contentious and require certain non-regional countries to give support to the regional members. This is, for example, the case with the AfDB’s more controversial loans tied to fossil fuels and natural gas. Western European countries and the United States all have a strong preference against these loans, but the continued approval of such loans suggests that African countries have managed to secure the support of key (vote-rich) non-regional members.⁴⁰ Japan has been one of these supporters since the country openly views natural gas as a transitional energy resource.⁴¹

While there was an acknowledgement that Japan might, of course, be making “strategic interventions” in line with some of its economic interests, the general impression is that Japan’s engagement is “often not narrow like that.”⁴² A regional executive director went on to explain that, “I think the Japanese do have a history of contributing to development

³⁵Interview B. Our interview findings are consistent with earlier work suggesting that the United States’ voice has often been ineffective because of African control of bank procedures (Shaw, 1991, 549).

³⁶Interview E.

³⁷Interview E.

³⁸Interview B.

³⁹In line with these interview-based findings, Assané and Parks (2016) argue that other members of voting groups seldom “have a say in how” the executive director uses their voting share to exert power.

⁴⁰Interview C. The interviewee also noted that US legislation regarding fossil fuels has meant that the US executive director cannot, in any way, support these loans.

⁴¹See, for example, Golubkova, Obayashi and Abnett (2023).

⁴²Interview B.

assistance and some good projects as well.” The director further explained that Japan is not overly assertive in its “dealings with the Bank.”⁴³

A senior AfDB official also echoed these sentiments, confirming that while there is extensive engagement with Japan, the country generally likes to keep a lower profile than other donors: “Japan is very quiet [about it], does not make too much noise [about its support].”⁴⁴ This view of Japan aligns with earlier views of its role at the AfDB as “a generous, quiet uncle in the midst of the fray” (Shaw, 1991, 545). In fact, when this particular assessment was brought up in one interview, an African director agreed, noting that: “from my first impressions, I would say that the ‘quiet uncle’ description is probably the right way; I think it’s just generally the Japanese style of doing foreign policy and business.”⁴⁵

6.1.2 Bilateral engagement with the AfDB

As we suggest in our argument, its “quiet” role should not be taken to mean that Japan has no influence. In fact, this is far from the case. Japan has been able to deepen its direct bilateral engagement with the AfDB in a way that is, according to one senior AfDB official, “far more extensive than anything [the AfDB] does with the United States or Europe.” When we eventually discussed our quantitative findings, the official explained that because there is a lot of co-financing that goes on between Japan and the AfDB, such a link between Japan and the African Bank “should not come as a surprise.” According to the official, although it might not be “publicised,” Japan “is very much, very much on the ground.”⁴⁶

Since co-financing was emphasised by this senior AfDB official, we confirmed just how much Japan contributes in co-financing relative to the rest of the AfDB’s donors. We found that Japan accounts for 60 percent of the AfDB’s in-house co-financing facilities for both sovereign and non-sovereign operations (AfDB, 2020, 14). As Figure 1 shows, the next two largest co-financiers are China and the Islamic Development Bank, accounting for just 13.3 percent and 10.5 percent of total funding, respectively.

Our interviews suggest that much of the connection between Japan’s preferences and AfDB funding commitments comes through these co-financed projects. As one official who is familiar with AfDB bilateral engagement explained, the AfDB, being much smaller than the World Bank, has the added benefit of making “it very easy [for cooperation], with senior

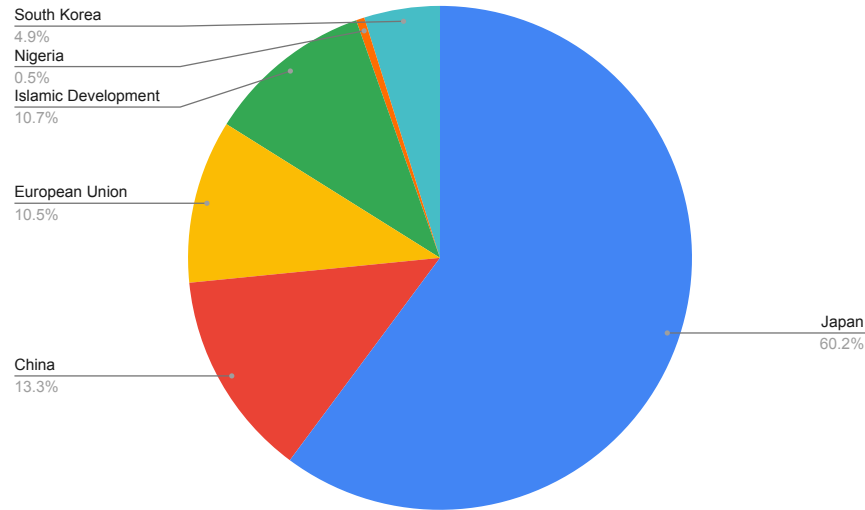
⁴³Interview B. The interviewee specifically pointed out that Japan’s engagement with the AfDB is not one of “an in your face” dynamic.

⁴⁴Interview A. This interviewee also noted that unlike other donors, Japan does not always want its support to be “publicised.”

⁴⁵Interview B.

⁴⁶Interview A.

Figure 1: AfDB in-house co-financing flagship facilities: funding sources



management being more accessible” to government agencies, like JICA.⁴⁷ These opportunities for engagement allow Japan to formally and informally communicate its preferences with AfDB staff, perhaps far more so than other non-regional shareholders are able.

The opportunity to directly communicate with AfDB management is important because AfDB staff, in many ways, can shape the level of financing that a country might get. For example, an executive director “can go and argue for why a country is not being given what [he or she] thinks they should get”—but they make these arguments to management, “who decides whether to act on them.”⁴⁸

One interviewee directed us to consider energy projects as areas where Japan’s close engagement with senior level management has been strategically beneficial. As the interviewee explained, “Japan is not necessarily going to sit there and preach to everybody, but they are like, okay, where, using our [Japanese] companies, can we make strategic interventions?”⁴⁹

Consider two examples. The state-owned Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) co-financed a \$24 billion Liquefied Natural Gas project (LNG) in Mozambique, which was the third largest of its kind in the world. With Japanese companies involved in the development of the gas field and Japan expected to buy 30 percent of its production, JBIC has linked the project to “securing stable supplies of LNG, which is an important energy resource for Japan” (JBIC, 2021).

⁴⁷Interview E.

⁴⁸Interview A.

⁴⁹Interview B. This interviewee also provided examples of how Japanese officials take joint trips with AfDB senior management to countries of interest.

In another example, JBIC and Mizuho Bank (one of the largest financial services company in Japan), along with the AfDB and nine other financial institutions, invested \$2.7 billion to build the Nacala corridor railway and port in Mozambique. JBIC has directly linked this project to securing “a stable supply of mineral resources to Japan” at a time when Japan’s traditional supplier, Australia, has become unreliable due to the impact of natural disasters (JBIC, 2017). These examples lend evidence to our argument about the use of international organizations, like the AfDB, to further Japanese foreign policy goals. In fact, they suggest that commercial interests might be as important as the pursuit of influence in international affairs.

Finally, we asked our interview subjects about other major shareholders, as well as China. When it comes to Germany, France, and the United Kingdom (UK), they note that these countries do not provide nearly as much co-financing as Japan, even when the role of European Union aid is considered.⁵⁰ Moreover, while existing ties between African countries and former colonial powers might play a role in their interactions within the AfDB context, neither France nor the United Kingdom has a permanent board seat, which is likely to limit their formal influence relative to a country like Japan.⁵¹ Both major powers do have a larger shareholding at the ADF relative to the AfDB as a whole, but they have also maintained lower voting shares compared to those of the United States and Japan.⁵²

This is reflected in our quantitative evidence as well.⁵³ Relative to Japan, we do not find comparable results. There is some evidence of a positive association with French aid and total AfDB commitments, but not with UK or German aid. Trade with the three countries is not statistically related to AfDB commitments. All three countries, however, exhibit a positive association with their UNGA voting and AfDB lending—something perhaps worthy of future research, especially with the case of France given the continuing influence of colonial legacies. Considering our quantitative evidence alongside our interview evidence, however, we are skeptical that these countries exercise the same level of influence as Japan.

As for China, our interview subjects were completely dismissive, given that China has a very low voting share and no permanent board seat. As one executive director explained, “the challenge for newly emerging countries is that they don’t have [executive director] seats. So, for example, China is represented by Canada. So, you know, I don’t even know how those [executive directors] mediate those voices.”⁵⁴ According to this interviewee, China has “struggled” to transform its otherwise out-sized economic influence in Africa into power

⁵⁰Interview A.

⁵¹Interview B.

⁵²Interview B, Interview D, and Interview E.

⁵³Results provided in Appendix C.

⁵⁴Interview B.

at the AfDB.⁵⁵ For what it is worth, we considered the possibility of Chinese influence quantitatively and found no evidence comparable with Japan.⁵⁶ We conclude that Japan is arguably the most powerful non-regional country at the AfDB.

7 Conclusion

Japan’s unique historical positionings have worked to its advantage in pursuing its political goals in Africa through the AfDB. The country’s lack of historical ties with African countries allows the Asian power to present itself as a more neutral partner in African development, even if it might have more self-interested political goals. Its imperial past in Asia, on the other hand, has facilitated a preference for multilateralism, which has encouraged its active engagement with the AfDB. Taken together, these two historical legacies have positioned Japan to neatly obfuscate its power and its pursuit of political goals in the African Bank.

Estimation results using data on total AfDB commitments between 1995 and 2015 provide support to this argument. We show that when a country is both politically aligned with, and economically important to, Japan’s foreign policy goals in Africa, the country is associated with larger commitments from the AfDB.

Our study is one of the very few studies to examine outside influence at the AfDB. The lack of interest in Africa is surprising. Africa has remained a geo-politically crucial region where power dynamics have born different fruit throughout the ages—from the slave trade and colonial markets of the past to the natural resources of today.⁵⁷ Regarding international finance more specifically, the region has become a battleground for great power competition in the twenty-first century (Blair, Marty and Roessler, 2022; Heyeraas, 2022; Li, 2017).⁵⁸

It is especially surprising that relatively little work has directly focused on the AfDB, in particular, considering that it is the only major multilateral development bank (MDB) where the largest shareholder is a developing country (Nigeria).⁵⁹ In a sense, the African Bank’s power structure fulfills the description of post-hegemonic cooperation more so than

⁵⁵Interview B.

⁵⁶Results provided in Appendix C.

⁵⁷On slave trade and colonies, see M’baye (2006); Kohli (2019); Nunn and Wantchekon (2011). On natural resources, see Alden and Alves (2009).

⁵⁸Some scholars have looked more specifically at the distribution of loans from international financial institutions to African countries. See Stone (2004), for example.

⁵⁹For example, Kentikelenis and Babb (2021) find that a search on JSTOR generated over 77,500 hits for the World Bank, but less than 1,500 for the AfDB. For these studies, see, for example, Jung and Kim (2022); Assané and Parks (2016). Where the AfDB has been included in most analyses, it is usually part of a broader comparative study (Ben-Artzi, 2016; Vreeland and Dreher, 2014; Neumayer, 2003; Obydenkova and Rodrigues Vieira, 2020).

any other major MDB (Shaw, 1991, 557).⁶⁰ And, in doing so, the AfDB offers a unique opportunity to examine the influence of major global powers in an institution where none of them is the top shareholder.

The AfDB is often lauded by both insiders and outsiders for maintaining its “African character”—a legacy held from the time it was created in 1964 and even after the admission of non-regional countries eighteen years after (Fordwor, 1981; English and Mule, 1996; Woods and Martin, 2012; Kraemer-Mbula, 2021). Yet, AfDB lending appears to be influenced by an Asian superpower, which, although committed to supporting the development aspirations of African countries, still has a vested interest in winning political support from African countries to advance its own status aspirations in the international community.

A broader implication of our study thus pertains to the trade-offs that are inherent in donor-financed IOs. Donor countries contribute financially, but even the most benevolent or altruistic of these donors might have silent strings attached. For a region with overwhelming development needs, like Africa, the choice seems obvious: ignore the politics and take the money.

Yet, what happens if the donor has goals that are not as benign as legitimising itself in the international community? In a world where China, for example, is facing media scrutiny over the so-called “debt-trap,” the emerging power might be increasingly constrained in its use of bilateral channels (Were, 2018). The creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank already point to China moving towards a multilateral route where it wields significant control. However, with a peak funding period in 2014 that saw \$2 billion injected into a new co-financing instrument with the AfDB (called the Africa Growing Together Fund), China might also be considering the use of African financial institutions to channel its influence.

It is difficult to predict what the political consequences of increased contributions by global powers to African financial institutions might be. Our paper nevertheless suggests that these institutions offer less contentious and more obscured avenues that interested global powers may take to further their quest for power through and within Africa. While China and the United States often find their influence over Africa critically scrutinized in headlines around the world, Japan’s quiet power proceeds largely unnoticed.

⁶⁰See also Keohane (1984, 244).

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Appendices

This document provides supporting information for our study on Japan and the African Development Bank (AfDB). Appendix A presents additional information on board governance at the AfDB while Appendix B presents descriptive data and additional information for our data analysis. Appendix C provides quantitative evidence regarding other donors. Appendix D presents details on our interview evidence.

A AfDB constituencies

AfDB shareholders are grouped into different constituencies. Although the executive directors are meant to represent the interests of all countries in their constituency, this is not always the case. As Table A1 shows, some constituencies are overly heterogenous to allow for any considerable degree of coordination. The constituency currently being represented by the Canadian executive director, for example, includes China, South Korea, Kuwait, Spain, and Turkey. Other constituencies are consistently dominated or controlled by the politics of the dominant shareholder.⁶¹ Japan, Nigeria, South Africa, Côte D'Ivoire, Egypt and Morocco, for example, always occupy the executive director position of their constituency.⁶² This has been the long-standing trend in AfDB board governance that led Shaw (1991) to term these shareholders “dictators” of their voting groups.

⁶¹See Shaw (1991, 542) and Assané and Parks (2016, 4).

⁶²The US operates as a one-country bloc with no constituency.

Table A1: AfDB Constituencies

Office	Regional members	Office	Non-regional members
BDIR.1	Morocco,* Togo, Tunisia	BDIR.2	Canada,* China, South Korea, Kuwait, Spain, Turkey
BDIR.5	Algeria,* Guinea Bissau, Madagascar	BDIR.3	Denmark, Finland, India, Ireland, Norway, Sweden
BDIR.6	Côte d'Ivoire,* Equatorial Guinea, Guinea	BDIR.4	Belgium, France, Spain
BDIR.7	Angola, , Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Gambia, Liberia, Sierra Leone	BDIR.12	United States*
BDIR.8	Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Comoros, Gabon, Mali, Niger, Senegal	BDIR.13	Germany,* Luxemburg, Switzerland, Portugal
BDIR.9	Djibouti, Egypt*	BDIR.18	Argentina, Austria, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Japan*
BDIR.10	Botswana, Malawi, Mauritius, Zambia	BDIR.20	Italy, Netherlands, United Kingdom
BDIR.11	Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo		
BDIR.14	Libya,* Mauritania		
BDIR.15	Gambia, Gambia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan		
BDIR.16	Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda		
BDIR.17	Nigeria,* Sao-Tome and Principe		
BDIR.19	Eswatini, Lesotho, South Africa*		

* Indicates permanent executive director of the voting group.

B Data description

This section presents information used for our statistical analysis. The list of countries in our dataset is reported in Table B1. Table B2 provides a list of all variables and their sources while summary statistics are reported in Table B3.

Table B1: List of countries in the full dataset

List of countries	
Algeria	Lesotho
Angola	Liberia
Benin	Madagascar
Botswana	Malawi
Burkina Faso	Mali
Burundi	Mauritania
Cabo Verde	Mauritius
Cameroon	Morocco
Central African Republic	Mozambique
Chad	Namibia
Comoros	Niger
Congo	Nigeria
Cote d'Ivoire	Rwanda
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Sao Tome and Principe
Djibouti	Senegal
Egypt	Seychelles
Equatorial Guinea	Sierra Leone
Eritrea	Somalia
Eswatini	South Africa
Ethiopia	Sudan
Gabon	Tanzania
Gambia	Togo
Ghana	Tunisia
Guinea	Uganda
Guinea-Bissau	Zambia
Kenya	Zimbabwe

Table B2: Variable list

Measure	Detail	Source
AfDB lending commitments		
ADF commitments	All ADF approvals in UA millions ^a	AfDB operations database
Measures of non-regional interests		
Japanese aid	ODA commitments in US\$ millions	OECD, 2021
US aid	ODA commitments in US\$ millions	OECD, 2021
Japanese trade	imports and exports	Kersting and Kilby, 2019
US trade	imports and exports	Kersting and Kilby, 2019
UNGA alignment - Japan	0 to 1 scale measuring voting alignment	Kersting and Kilby, 2019
UNGA alignment - US	0 to 1 scale measuring voting alignment	Kersting and Kilby, 2019
Controls		
GDP/capita	GDP per capita in constant US\$	World Bank
Population	Total population	World Bank
Life expectancy	Life expectancy at birth, total (years)	World Bank
Regime type	-10 (autocracy) to +10 (democracy)	Kersting and Kilby, 2019

^aCommitments are reported in Units of Account (UA), which is the AfDB's official reporting currency. We first convert the financial commitment amount in UA to nominal USD dollars based on the exchange rate reported by the AfDB in its annual report for the commitment year. All commitments are then converted into real (2021) US dollars, using the GDP deflator.

Table B3: Descriptive statistics

	Count	Mean	SD	Min	Max
AfDB commitments	1097	12.27	8.181787	0	21.94139
Japan: UN voting	1097	0.717	0.0542662	0.55625	0.8455882
Japan: aid (log transformed)	1113	15.45	3.53883	0	21.51544
Japan: trade (log transformed)	1113	14.93	6.793615	0	23.33057
US: UN voting	1097	0.315	0.1128956	0.0961538	0.8416666
US: aid (log transformed)	1113	16.28	4.316281	0	21.4402
US: trade (log transformed)	1113	15.77	7.133583	0	24.41624
World trade (log transformed)	1113	18.37	8.112349	0	26.08772
Population (log transformed)	1113	15.75	1.57453	11.2293	19.03042
GDP per capita (log transformed)	1049	7.098	0.9583525	5.387357	9.626319
Life expectancy	1113	56.98	7.957695	18.385	75.692
Regime type	1054	1.116	5.26901	-9	10
<i>N</i>	1113				

C Other major powers

Table C1: African Development Bank commitments

	Japan	Germany	France	United Kingdom	China
Major power: UN voting	12.00* (6.712)	12.68* (7.379)	16.29* (8.371)	16.41* (8.935)	2.291 (3.457)
Major power aid	0.331** (0.136)	-0.0513 (0.255)	0.451* (0.236)	0.0191 (0.0714)	0.0558 (0.0402)
Major power trade	0.284* (0.162)	-0.212 (0.214)	0.330 (0.853)	0.00831 (0.601)	0.145 (0.121)
World trade	0.0771 (0.148)	0.531** (0.200)	0.0366 (0.741)	0.325 (0.518)	-1.297 (1.279)
Population	3.946 (5.777)	5.117 (5.613)	4.530 (5.347)	4.397 (5.525)	9.899 (8.434)
GDP per capita	-4.020** (1.748)	-4.034** (1.672)	-4.157** (1.755)	-3.999** (1.727)	-6.216** (2.556)
Life expectancy	0.119 (0.130)	0.136 (0.129)	0.163 (0.126)	0.152 (0.133)	0.205 (0.168)
Regime type	0.0772 (0.156)	0.146 (0.167)	0.120 (0.169)	0.132 (0.172)	0.327 (0.212)
Number of countries	50	50	50	50	49
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	956	956	956	952	729
Adjusted R2	0.283	0.276	0.278	0.278	0.292

Note: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at country-level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. For China, we use data from Dreher et al. (2018), which relies on AidData's Chinese Official Finance to Africa dataset (version 1.2) and covers the period between 1997 and 2013. When we substitute world trade for trade with the member states of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as in Dreher et al. (2018), the results for the China specification remain robust.

D Interviews

The interviews were conducted via video call and face-to-face in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire. All interviews were with officials currently involved with the AfDB. They were undertaken with the understanding that respondents would be pseudonymised, with unique alphabetical identifiers. For example, we cited interviewees as “a current executive director at the AfDB” and “an official familiar with Japan-AfDB relations” in the main paper. Table D1 provides a list of interviewees.

The series of interviews conducted were semi-structured and focused on the following questions:

1. What are your country’s strategic priorities at the AfDB?
2. How does AfDB governance compare with the World Bank or the IMF?
3. What power do executive directors have on the AfDB board?
4. On Japan and the United States: How would you describe their role or dynamic at the AfDB?
5. On other major powers: How would you describe their role or dynamic at the AfDB?

Table D1: Interviews

ID	Interviewee	Dates	Mode of Contact
Interview A	Senior director	27 Feb and 23 Mar 2023	Video call, phone call
Interview B	Executive director (regional)	6 Apr 2023	Video call
Interview C	Executive director (non-regional)	9 May 2023	Video call
Interview D	Executive director (non-regional)	12 May 2023	Video call
Interview E	AfDB official	10 May and 8 Jun 2023	Video call, face-to-face