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From *The Economist* print edition

It's sushi for Africa's leaders

THE copper is used in computers. The nickel is for batteries. Tungsten is used to fortify steel for cars. Japan buys much of its rare metal from China to feed its electronics and car industries. But as booming China has begun to close the spigot to safeguard its own supplies, Japan, the world's second biggest economy, has been forced to look elsewhere for an alternative source—in Africa.

On May 28th it hosted the Tokyo International Conference on African Development, a quadrennial event since 1993. About 40 African heads of state or government attended. Japan's prime minister, Yasuo Fukuda, promised to meet each one individually, as well as Bono, a pop singer, without whom no such gathering on Africa is complete.

But whereas in previous meetings aid topped the agenda, this time it has been all about the hunt for natural resources—with Africa's best interests at heart, of course. "If we are able to utilise Africa's plentiful resources more fully by harnessing Japan's technologies," Mr Fukuda said, "this will surely be a major trigger for growth and without a doubt benefit Africa."

This has become a familiar refrain from the leaders of Asia's other expanding economies. Japan is following firmly in the footsteps of China and India, both of which have hosted lavish African summits in the past 18 months, both of them keen to buy Africa's oil and metals.

Like the others, Japan is offering sweeteners to make itself a saucier commercial partner. This week it pledged to double aid to Africa by 2012, to \$3.4 billion. It will also provide up to \$4 billion in low-interest rate loans, which means easing its rules against lending to countries that have previously received debt relief.

Japanese officials stress that all this comes with no strings attached (except perhaps Africa's support for a permanent Japanese seat in the UN Security Council), a not-too-subtle hint that the country hopes to compete on an equal footing with China. Its loans are never linked to improvements in governance or human rights, unlike many of those from Europe, which hosted its own Africa summit in Portugal last December, or America. This reflects the fact that Japan has come late to this second scramble for Africa—and knows it.

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