

Purposive, not reactive

Japan's museum diplomacy in Egypt



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OPINION

When the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) officially opened in Giza, Egypt, on November 1, 2025, few observers noticed what the numbers revealed. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) financed over 80% of the museum's 84-billion-yen (\$1-billion) construction budget.

Directional signage across its halls appeared in Arabic, English, and Japanese. The choice of languages, especially Japanese, was an act of geopolitical inscription. Why did JICA invest in GEM? What kind of interests does Tokyo have in the Egyptian museum? Japan's approach to museum diplomacy has reconceptualised the very meaning of "influence" itself. Rather than competing directly with other Asian powers through military bases, trade corridors, and security partnerships, Japan is moving into the realm of cultural memory and so-called civilisational stewardship. Japan's investment in the GEM represents a deliberate way of embedding long-term influence not through debt-laden infrastructure mega-projects, but through the shaping of how societies understand their own pasts and futures.

For decades, Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) has been synonymous with technical excellence and disaster resilience. Nonetheless, Egypt was not an obvious arena for Tokyo's strategic outreach. Japan's ODA policy has changed significantly since its postwar origins, shifting from mainly commercial interests towards more strategic geopolitical deployment. The choice of Egypt is something more calculated: a recognition that influence in the 21st century is increasingly contested through control over how societies understand their pasts and imagine their futures. Where some powers build ports and highways, Japan is learning to build meaning itself.

The symbolic significance is difficult to overstate. As the world's largest archaeological museum, the GEM houses over 50,000 artefacts, many displayed for the first time. By funding the conservation labs, restoration work, and the centrepiece recovery of the Khufu "solar boat," Japan has successfully positioned itself as a "custodian" of global heritage. This support matters precisely because heritage stewardship cannot be easily reversed. Once a country plays a role in curating how a civilisation presents its identity, the role becomes structurally embedded in how that nation imagines itself as it can determine which artefacts are displayed, how they are contextualised, and which narratives are amplified. Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike's attendance at the opening ceremony is another strategic intention.

A Cairo University graduate who experienced the 1973 October War (Yom Kippur War) brought something technical bureaucrats cannot: she embodied the relational depth that Japan sought to communicate. When senior political figures invest their symbolic capital in cultural diplomacy, they signal that the partnership extends beyond transactional exchange. Her participation in a broader diplomatic tour across the Arab region in October, emphasising health, education, and environmental cooperation, intertwines the GEM into a larger picture of institutional ties that transcend any single project.

Japan's cultural ODA footprint extends well beyond Egypt. JICA's involvement in restoring heritage sites in Kathmandu Valley after the 2015 Gorkha Earth-



Abe Toshiko (7th-L), Japan's minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, visits the Grand Egyptian Museum along with her accompanying delegation on May 10, 2025.

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quake, including the reconstruction of the Degu Taleju Temple in Patan Durbar Square, follows an identical logic. By dispatching heritage conservation experts to work alongside Nepal's own institutions, Japan builds physical infrastructure, local technical capacity, and institutional memory all together. The symbolic reopening of the temple in April 2025 positioned Japan as a partner committed to both technical excellence and cultural continuity. What emerges from these examples is a reconfigured understanding of geo-economic power.

Twentieth-century hegemony was projected through military bases, resource concessions, and strategic enclaves. In contrast, 21st-century influence increasingly flows through what we might call the infrastructure of meaning: museums, archives, conservation expertise, and cultural landscapes.

Cultural ODA carries distinct advantages. It does not generate the debt anxieties associated with major connectivity megaprojects, nor does it trigger the

geopolitical sensitivities of military partnerships. More crucially, its returns accumulate slowly but durably, in trust, institutional alignment, and narrative credibility.

For Egypt, whose influence in the Middle East has slowly declined, Japan's support addresses an immediate crisis: revitalising a tourism economy devastated by years of political uncertainty and collapsing visitor numbers. The GEM's opening promises both economic recovery and restored national prestige. For policymakers across the Indo-Pacific, however, the strategic lesson cuts deeper. The competition for influence is no longer confined to maritime chokepoints, semiconductor supply chains, or development finance. It is equally contested through the stewardship of collective memory. This approach matters because how a nation understands its past shapes how it imagines its geopolitical future.

Countries that help curate that understanding acquire leverage that operates below the threshold of traditional

diplomacy — influence that persists across electoral cycles and regime transitions, that cannot be easily audited or contested because it appears cultural rather than political.

Japan's engagement in Egypt and Nepal reveals a shift in what "infrastructure" means in geoeconomic competition. By investing in institutions that preserve identity and heritage, Japan is constructing an influence that outlasts any single loan agreement or connectivity corridor. The GEM thus marks both a milestone for Egypt's cultural sector and a reminder of Japan's influence itself — extending its reach into the world's museums, heritage sites, and symbolic spaces where national identity is perpetually remade. Tokyo's strategy is driven not by external pressure, as Calder once said, but by deliberate strategic choice. It is a new geography of geo-economic power in the 21st century.

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Heavy machinery is being used to move the wooden "solar boat" of Khufu to its new permanent display home in the Grand Egyptian Museum in Giza, Egypt.

EGYPTIAN MINISTRY OF TOURISM AND ANTIQUITY