

FUKUZAWA YUKICHI'S THOUGHT ON PROMOTING THE ROLE OF CITIZENS IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834–1901), who was titled as “Voltaire of Japan” by Japanese people, served as the spirit, driving force, and intellectual support of the restoration conducted by the Meiji government. Throughout his life, Fukuzawa articulated numerous influential ideas aimed at national development; among which, his view on citizens and the promotion of citizens’ role through education stands out, especially in the context of a society still deeply influenced by Confucian values. Fukuzawa asserted that citizens are the cornerstone of a nation's development. In his view, such development must begin with the improvement of public knowledge to foster a sense of self-reliance and social responsibility among individuals. Each citizen, he believed, must be fully aware of their role in building a progressive, democratic, and sustainable society. Fukuzawa’s thought on promoting the role of citizens remains not only historically significant to Japan but also profoundly relevant to developing countries today. This study is conducted based on the principles of objectivity, comprehensiveness, historical specificity, and development, while employing various methodologies - including textual analysis, analytical-synthetic method, hermeneutics, and phenomenology - to examine the key issues addressed in the topic.

Keywords: Citizen; ; Fukuzawa Yukichi; role of citizens

1. Introduction

Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834 - 1901) is honored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as the "*master of enlightenment in the Meiji era*" (UNESCO, 1968, p. 12). In the context of historical and social upheavals and having witnessed the significant shifts during this transitional period, Fukuzawa believed that clinging to the old social order and maintaining feudal ideologies would lead to Japan's stagnation and eventual collapse. He argued that Japan would be at risk of becoming colonized by European powers, much like India, China, and Africa, if reforms were not implemented. He wrote: "If we compare the intellectual levels of Japanese and Westerners, in literature, arts, commerce, or industry, from the significant to the trifling matters, in thousands of cases or even a single instance, there is no field in which they are not superior to us. Only the ignorant would think that our academic, artistic, commercial, or industrial capacities are on par with those of the West. Who would compare a horse-drawn carriage with a steam engine, or a Japanese sword with a rifle? While we are still discussing the theories of Yin and Yang and the Five Elements, they have discovered sixty chemical elements. While we are still guessing our fortunes according to astrology, they have mapped the courses of comets and are studying the structures of the moon and the sun. While we think that we live on a flat and immobile earth, they know that the earth is spherical and in constant motion. While we regard Japan as the sacred islands of the gods, they have sailed around the world, discovering new lands, and finding new nations. Many of their political, commercial, and legal systems are more admirable than the ones we have" (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2018, p. 99). Fukuzawa Yukichi's ideas on citizens and the promotion of citizens' role through education were formed and developed during a time of profound historical and social transformation in Japan. With the country facing imminent threats from imperial powers, his vision for national development focused on the importance of cultivating independent and self-reliant citizens to build national strength and resist foreign scheme of invasion.

2. Discussion

First, what is meant by “citizen”? Stemming from the critical need for development in the latter half of the 19th century in Japan, Fukuzawa Yukichi endeavored to eliminate the notion of “subjects”—a class of people who, under the feudal system, were oppressed and exploited both physically and mentally by the ruling elite, thus were robbed of any awareness of individual rights as well as a consciousness to unite and advocate for personal freedom and civic responsibilities. Thus, Fukuzawa sought to construct a modern citizenry consisting of individuals who embody the spirit of independence, political awareness and national pride, and are entitled to fundamental and inalienable natural rights such as the right to live and to protect their property and dignity regardless of their social background, in order to contribute to the national development process. He wrote:

“Then, what are human rights? They are the rights that give high regard to human life, protect a man’s property, and dignify his reputation and honor. [...] Ever since man came to existence, Heavens [...] has bestowed him with the right to live, and under no circumstances should him be deprived of such right. The life of a feudal lord is just as valuable as that of a hired laborer. A rich merchant protects his vast fortune no more than the small vendor does his meager coins.” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2015, p. 41).

Thus, according to Fukuzawa Yukichi, a citizen is defined as a new type of individual, regardless of origin or background, who possesses political consciousness, a sense of responsibility towards society, and loyalty to the nation and his people. Such individuals are entitled to be treated fairly in society and to enjoy fundamental natural rights, including the right to live, the right to own property, and the right to dignity - which cannot be infringed upon by anyone. With that, they form the foundational force that must be fostered for the advancement and development of the nation.

Second, regarding the role of citizens:

Fukuzawa Yukichi argued that although Japan is a unified entity composed of people sharing the same ancestry and history, and living within the same territorial boundaries, the nation had yet to possess a true national spirit. "In

Japan, there is a government, but no nation" (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p. 315). This was because, up until that time, Japan was merely a collection of people living together on a piece of land under the rule of a government, and had not yet reached the form of a "nation" - a state where people are consciously aware of national identity. Each citizen in Japan lacked a sense of self and independence. While individual in nature, this could become a national issue if society as a whole consisted of such people:

"If the citizens are not independent in term of personality, their patriotism will also be vague, shallow, and irresponsible. [...] If the entire population merely seeks to rely on others and lacks independence, then they will turn into parasites, draining the nation's resources and exploiting the wealth of social institutions. Between individuals, there may be no willingness to help one another" (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2015, p. 52).

Fukuzawa Yukichi put an emphasis on the lack of national spirit among the Japanese people, as he believed it was a very dangerous situation: "If the people lack self-reliance and the spirit of independence, it would be difficult for us to compete with the world for equal rights as an independent nation" (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2015, p. 52). Japanese people's docile and submissive character shaped by the feudal era had created an unprecedented stability; however, it was not a healthy situation. When the country faced external threats, the government's primary goal was no longer to maintain control over local forces, but to focus on the national goal: to protect the independence of the entire country from superior foreign powers. At that point, ensuring independence required a united effort from both the central government and the masses. The danger from the absence of an independent spirit would become evident:

"Those who are indifferent in his house will be so in society, and those who are dull in internal matters can not act swiftly or intelligently in foreign issues. While a complacent and indifferent people may serve convenient for an authoritarian government, relations with foreign countries will be nearly impossible if we depend on such people" (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p. 177).

The threat to the nation's very survival had become imminent, making it an urgent necessity to change this reality. Aware of the danger, Fukuzawa

Yukichi however did not have a pessimistic outlook. He believed that the dangerous indifference of the people could be corrected, provided the issue was addressed at its root. According to him, the mindset of people was merely the result of ingrained customs and regime, and thus these were precisely the focus through which change could be effected.:

“The indifference and lack of courage are not innate flaws, but rather something lost due to the absence of customs that nurture and encourage them. Therefore, if we wish to revive these attitudes, there is no other way but to rely on the power of customs. Changing our customs, then, is of utmost importance.” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p. 178)

The “custom” that Fukuzawa Yukichi refers to is the entrenched condition where people lacked independent judgment, critical thought, and concern for public affairs as well as the fate of the nation. This was the direct result of the feudal style of governance that had previously prevailed. The authoritarian rule of the Tokugawa shogunate fostered a pervasive atmosphere of fear, leading people to become passively obedient over time and be devoid of the courage or even the inclination to engage with matters of national concern. Moreover, certain feudal regimes adopted a style of governance known as “shepherding the people”, which produced similarly detrimental effects. Under this model, citizens were regarded as docile and weak beings incapable of self-protection or of understanding complex issues such as politics. This form of governance was often celebrated as an expression of “benevolence” on the part of the ruling class. However, Fukuzawa criticized it for fostering a population that lacked initiative and creativity, thus became overly dependent on the government. People came to believe that the state would manage all national affairs effectively on their behalf, rendering their own engagement unnecessary. Over time, such a belief system eroded the political capacity and civic agency of the masses, creating a fatal vulnerability in the face of external threats:

“Gradually, the relationship between the ruling class and the people degenerates into that of a host and a guest. And as the guest is dependent on his host, the people (guest) cease to concern themselves with state affairs, and even less with the fate of the nation, believing that the important matters of the

country are for the government (host) to handle. Now, imagine that this nation is threatened or invaded by a foreign power, and let us suppose that not a single citizen betrays his fatherland or defects to the enemy, what would happen, then?” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2015, p. 54)

According to Fukuzawa Yukichi, citizens and government are two inseparable components that constitute a nation. If either is weakened, the nation cannot remain strong. While the government assumes the role of coordinating and managing common affairs, and holds considerable power in terms of human resources, finances, and military force, it is nonetheless limited in its ability to fully grasp the people's daily lives. In matters of public welfare, the government especially relies on the cooperation and support of its citizens. The participation of citizens provides an authentic and valuable source of information for policymaking. More importantly, such participation must be grounded in a spirit of positivity and voluntarism in order to realize its full potential. Political engagement should be regarded as a civic duty; however, above all, it is essential to cultivate a sense of responsibility within each citizen - an awareness of their role and significance in the development of the nation. Fukuzawa aspired for all social classes to actively take an interest in the issues confronting the country. Only through the collective consensus and synchronized efforts of all segments of society can true independence, sustainability, and national prosperity be achieved.

The spirit of independence and political awareness among the people must be cultivated through education. Fukuzawa Yukichi emphasized the critical role of intellectual development in building national strength. In his view, “When the people are ignorant, political power inevitably declines. Once political power is weakened, the nation ceases to be its true self. At that point, even its political structure can no longer be preserved” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p. 84). This conclusion was drawn from his observation of the characteristics of various nations. He noted that in societies that had lost their independence to foreign powers, the people's level of awareness was low, and their worldview remained narrow:

“Why is it that Indian culture and Turkish military heritage have not been able to contribute to the advancement of civilization of each? It is because the minds of their peoples were confined to the place and the country they were living in, and they were content with such limitations. They failed to compare themselves with, or take notice of, the remarkable progress of other countries. Moreover, having grown too accustomed to peace, they lived in complacency, blindly praising what was familiar. As a result, they fell behind in global economic competition, and before long, the nation’s potential had vanished without notice” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2015, p. 181).

Building on this analysis, Fukuzawa Yukichi regarded intellectual development as the foremost objective for securing the nation’s future. Intelligence, in his view, was not merely a means to enhance a person’s quality of life, but also a crucial means to wake national consciousness within each citizen. Once intellectual development spreads across all regions and social strata, national identity and civic spirit will become more pronounced, thereby generating collective strength for the entire nation:

“If the intellectual capacity of the nation continues to grow, refining crude patriotism into something more sophisticated, helping the immature to mature, and thereby upholding the political structure of Japan, then that can truly be called an incomparable blessing.” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p. 164)

Third, on how to promote the role of citizens in national development:

Fukuzawa Yukichi consistently emphasized the value of intelligence, especially collective one. In his view, intelligence has far greater power than morality in disseminating values and creating broad and profound impacts on society. To explain this, he introduced four concepts: *personal morality*, *collective morality*, *personal knowledge*, and *collective knowledge*. *Personal morality*, he explained, refers to “virtues within the human soul, such as honesty, innocence, modesty, and loyalty” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p.279). *Collective morality* consists of “virtues that emerge in one’s interactions with others and with society, such as integrity, righteousness, fairness, and courage” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p.180). *Personal knowledge* is defined as “the intellectual capacity to understand things and to act rightly based on that understanding”

(Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p.180), while *collective knowledge* refers to “the ability to discern the relative significance of human actions, thereby determining appropriate behavior for specific times and situations” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p.180). Among these four guiding elements of society, collective knowledge is the most powerful and essential. Fukuzawa argued that knowledge has a stronger influence than morality. This does not mean he dismissed the importance of morality; rather, he believed that at that time, the Japanese (along with other nations influenced by Confucianism) tended to excessively emphasize personal virtues. According to Fukuzawa, personal morality is merely the product of individual cultivation; it is inward-facing and passive, and its effects are primarily limited to the individual, without significantly radiating outward to affect others or society at large. Morality rises to the level of collectivity when, in the face of a situation, people are able to recognize the appropriate attitudes and behaviors. When proper conduct is recognized, evaluated, and emulated by others, it creates a ripple effect within the community. To attain this level of collective morality, people must possess sufficient intellectual capacity to assess events and draw their own conclusions. A civilized and progressive society is reflected in the quality of its citizens’ social conduct.

Focusing primarily on individual self-cultivation, morality has seen relatively little change or development throughout human history. The moral teachings of revered sages such as Jesus Christ, the Buddha, and Confucius have remained enduring standards for thousands of years. In contrast, intelligence does not follow this pattern. New discoveries, inventions, and theories are constantly subject to scrutiny and revision, even completely overturning prior understandings, and these transformations tend to progress in a positive and more refined direction. Notably, each time a significant discovery or theoretical breakthrough occurs, it can alter the entire fabric of society and even usher in a new chapter in human history. Intellectual knowledge spreads rapidly and broadly, elevating the quality of human life. Fukuzawa drew a comparative conclusion: “Comparing the impact of intelligence and morality, the former is strong and far-reaching, while the latter is feeble and narrower” (Fukuzawa

Yukichi, 2019, p.186). Accordingly, he argues that if one wishes to effect change across society, it must be done through intellectual means, for “attempts to advise and reform one's family and friends through personal virtues cannot be compared to the speed of diffusion and breadth of influence of intelligence” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p.194). Furthermore, as civilization progresses, personal morality will gradually give way to collective morality. In Fukuzawa Yukichi's view, the inevitable path toward social advancement lies in cultivating shared values and common levels of understanding, rather than focusing solely on the internal moral refinement of individuals.

In order for intelligence to flourish in society, stimulating exchange and thereby generating and disseminating progressive values, citizens must first be free to form and express their own ideas. Under authoritarian regimes, people are tightly controlled to prevent the formation of groups deemed subversive to the ruling power. Such restrictive governance instills fear in people, rendering them reluctant to gather, deliberate, or voice their opinions. Over time, this environment fosters a habitual aversion to public discourse and a disengagement from matters of collective concern, ultimately cultivating an atmosphere of apathy toward national issues. A country steeped in such a mindset is inherently incapable of resisting external threats. Without the intellectual engagement and cooperation of its citizens, even the most capable leadership cannot effectively govern a vast population. In such circumstances, the ruling elite becomes increasingly isolated, while the citizens remain indifferent, passively resigned to whatever fate may befall the nation.

Authoritarian rule often renders citizens unable to distinguish between association and assembly for discussion. Open discussion is an essential mechanism through which the thoughts of people can be expressed and developed. In the absence of such, society falls into a condition where “when asked individually, everyone has an opinion, but these opinions are fragmented into tens of millions of disparate ideas. Without a means to consolidate and synthesize them, they ultimately serve no purpose for the nation as a whole” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p. 175). Fukuzawa asserted that each person must voice their own opinions whether right or wrong, because doing so brings value

not only to others but also to the individual. Through active and engaged discussion, issues can be explored in greater depth and addressed at their core, thereby producing insights with wide-reaching implications and enabling social progress. The phenomenon of citizens becoming indifferent to public discourse unfolds durably and imperceptibly, eventually solidifying into a custom. This custom, as previously analyzed, causes individuals to lose the habit of civic engagement and stunts intellectual development. Simultaneously, it suppresses the emergence of innovative thinking among members of that society.

In his advocacy for the protection and advancement of individual liberty, Fukuzawa Yukichi consistently placed the highest value on freedom of speech. Language, he argued, is the fundamental vehicle through which individuals articulate their own thoughts, while debate serves as the means by which those thoughts can be communicated and shared with others in society. Fukuzawa recognized the limitations inherent in the enforcement of dogmatic ideologies, a characteristic often found in feudal regimes. He observed:

“If one only defends a single school of thought, then no matter how pure or noble that school may be, it cannot possibly give rise to the spirit of freedom. That spirit can exist only amid the clash of diverse arguments and opposing viewpoints.” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p. 61)

Debate within the realm of thought does not serve solely to arrive at a definitive truth. Rather, it is the very process of debate, regardless of whether each individual’s opinion is right or wrong, that cultivates a spirit of intellectual skepticism, enthusiasm, and active thinking. When confined to a pre-imposed ideological framework, people tend to adopt a compliant attitude, accepting its tenets without a trace of doubt. This uncritical obedience leads people to grasp only the surface of moral behaviors, without understanding the underlying rationale or principles. Such superficial understanding, in turn, makes them prone to mechanically and erroneously applying moral teachings. No matter how valuable classical doctrines may be, they were created long ago in particular historical and cultural contexts, and aimed to address specific problems of their time. Thus, it is imperative to understand the essence of these teachings, rules, and knowledge before attempting to effectively apply them to one’s own life.

Freedom of speech is also a crucial means through which the government can accurately grasp its nation's actual situation. In contexts where speech is tightly controlled, citizens tend to conceal their true thoughts when the government seeks public opinion. As a result, the collected information lacks genuine value, impeding the government's ability to assess the real situation and formulate appropriate governance strategies. When faced with major challenges, such as internal division or foreign threats, this failure to understand the public sentiment poses a serious risk to national destiny. To mitigate such risks, Fukuzawa Yukichi advocated for the role of free publication. He believed that freedom of the press serves as a conduit for the government to hear the intellectual discourse of the educated class. Intellectuals represent a vital national resource: they are perceptive, attuned to the times, and deeply concerned with national affairs. When granted the freedom to engage in open discussion, these individuals can contribute valuable insights to national development. Moreover, the spirit of freedom nurtured through such public discourse will gradually permeate other social strata, cultivating the courage necessary to guide the nation toward civilization. Fukuzawa affirmed: "All people are equal; therefore, let us confidently devote our utmost ability, energy, and intellect. Each person bears their own responsibilities, and thus must cultivate their talents and character in a manner befitting those" (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2015, p. 33). Such cultivation does not occur naturally - it must be pursued through education. This includes the acquisition of knowledge and skills essential to one's occupation, as well as the development of sound, flexible, and insightful thinking. Once a citizen's talent reaches a certain level, he may, if he so chooses, be appointed to government positions and contribute meaningfully to national affairs. Fukuzawa's vision opened a new perspective for Japan at that time. In contrast to the feudal system in which personal worth was affirmed primarily through entry into officialdom, Fukuzawa asserted the inherent worth of every individual, regardless of social class or occupation. This shift not only dissuaded citizens from obsessively pursuing bureaucratic careers, but also helped awaken and unleash the latent potential within each person - potential that had long been suppressed under traditional ways of thinking.

Fukuzawa Yukichi strove to awaken the intrinsic value within each of the citizens; however, this did not imply that he saw all occupations as being of equal standing. He acknowledged that people naturally distinguish between types of labor, considering whether a task is significant or trivial, a duty heavy or light. In general, individuals are inclined to pursue work that is regarded as significant or important. According to Fukuzawa, such attitude reflects an aspirational spirit and a desire for self-improvement. Those with fervent passion and strong will seek to challenge themselves and contribute to society; they are noble-minded individuals with ambitions to achieve great things. This aspiration toward greatness, he argued, is a positive inclination that fosters social progress. However, to realize such lofty goals requires intellectual capacity. In determining what constitutes an important or trivial task, people often rely on the perceived level of difficulty. Yet difficulty alone does not guarantee social value. For a goal to be meaningful, it must generate tangible benefits. Fukuzawa pointed out that without sufficient discernment, one may struggle to distinguish between useful and futile endeavors. Exerting effort on challenging tasks that yield no social benefit ultimately amounts to wasted labor. Therefore, in striving to undertake meaningful and significant work, intellectual capacity is an indispensable component, as passion, perseverance, and diligence are not sufficient on their own.

In addition to valuing the contributions of individuals from all social strata, Fukuzawa particularly encouraged citizens to dedicate themselves to the private sector. This marked a distinctive feature of his thought, as it stood in contrast to the traditional Confucian ideal of pursuing officialdom as the primary path to social advancement. He argued that intellectuals and scholars need not enter government service or directly administer national affairs in order to exert meaningful influence over the nation's destiny. Rather, they should operate within their own distinct sphere - one that remains independent from governmental functions - and in doing so, may even outperform political leaders in contributing to the nation's progress:

“While the government is responsible for maintaining social order and handling everyday affairs, intellectuals should devote themselves to deep

contemplation in order to formulate strategies for the future; meanwhile, entrepreneurs and those in commerce and industry must manage their enterprises effectively to increase the nation's wealth. Each sector makes its own contribution to civilization. Naturally, the government too must reflect on both past and future matters, just as intellectuals must also engage with present-day issues” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, p.149).

For Fukuzawa, intellectually engaged citizens - particularly scholars - constituted an essential force in national development. These people were perceptive, responsive to the times, and deeply concerned with the state of the world. He viewed scholars, whether officials or just ordinary civilians, as an independent group who devoted to academic pursuits in service of the nation. When not involved in government or the direct administration of public affairs, they serve as "diagnosticians of politics." Their distance from political power enables them to maintain an independent, accurate, and long-term perspective:

“The work of the government is akin to that of a surgeon, while the scholar’s role resembles that of promoting long-term health and education. Although their methods differ in terms of speed and immediacy, both are equally essential to sustaining a strong and healthy nation. What matters most is that the two do not hinder one another, but instead support and encourage each other, ensuring that no obstacle, however small, stands in the way of the nation’s progress toward civilization” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2019, pp. 149–150).

Fukuzawa maintained that the progress of society throughout history was not solely the result of a small number of ruling elites but rather the product of the collective intelligence of the wider population. Thus, for a nation to advance, it is imperative to cultivate the strength of the masses. He encouraged citizens to develop the private sector across all spheres of activity, from academic research to production and commerce. The government, in his view, should actively create favorable conditions for private economic enterprise by supporting and protecting the establishment and growth of private companies. He emphasized that the government constitutes only a small segment of the nation. While it may wield the authority to ensure stability and effective administration, true national advancement, especially toward a state of civilization, requires the mobilization

of the entire nation's resources. Harnessing the talents of individuals working in the private sector was a strategic and necessary approach to this goal. He asserted:

“Under pressure from the West, where should Japanese intellectuals position themselves in order to defend the independence of the nation? Is it better to join the government as civil servants and work diligently, or to remain outside the government and contribute from the private sector? I have reached the conclusion: it is better to remain outside the government.” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, 2015, p. 75)

According to Fukuzawa, the top-priority national objective was to lead Japan toward civilization - a goal to be pursued collectively by the entire nation. Whether individuals work within the government or in the private sector, they are all members of the Japanese nation and therefore share responsibility for striving toward this common goal. The government and the private sector should not be regarded as “rivals” or “adversaries,” but rather as integral components of the nation, linked by a cooperative and mutually supportive relationship. Should the private sector grow strong and act in ways that threaten the government or endanger national sovereignty, such behavior would constitute a violation of the implicit agreement regarding the division of power. In such cases, the government holds the legitimate authority to penalize individuals who engage in actions that jeopardize national stability. From this perspective, the flow of talent from the private sector to the public sector should not be seen as a risk of destabilization. On the contrary, if the government can effectively manage and harness the intellectual capacity of private-sector talent, it would gain access to a powerful engine for national development.

Conclusion

Fukuzawa Yukichi's thought on citizens was not only a progressive viewpoint within the historical context of late 19th-century Japan, but also an enduring guiding principle in the pursuit of a democratic, civilized, and developed society. He regarded citizens as the fundamental foundation of the nation - individuals who must be enlightened intellectually, cultivated morally, and equipped with knowledge in order to take charge of their own lives and contribute to the future of the country. Fukuzawa emphasized that national

development cannot rely solely on the ruling class or external assistance; it must originate from the self-reliance and sense of responsibility of each individual within society. The call to “enlighten the people’s intelligence, strengthen their spirit, and enrich their livelihoods” was not merely a slogan, but a comprehensive reform strategy to transition from a feudal society to a modern one, and from passive reception to proactive construction. In today’s rapidly changing and globalized world, it is ever more critical that each citizen recognize their role - not merely as a recipient of policy, but as an active builder of society - through lifelong learning, contribution, innovation, and a deep sense of social responsibility. Fukuzawa’s thought stands not only as a valuable intellectual legacy of Japan but also as a powerful source of inspiration for nations still striving toward development.

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