



# Asia Pacific Bulletin

## Japan's Crucial Role in Afghanistan

BY VICTORIA TUKE

Japan's contribution to Afghanistan, though not very visible, is arguably no less significant than that of some troop-supporting nations in NATO. Since 2001, Japan has contributed over \$4 billion towards Afghanistan's reconstruction, with another \$3 billion pledged in 2012. This makes Japan the second largest donor after the United States. Whilst often unspoken, Japan's engagement in Afghanistan represents an important side of Japanese diplomacy. One prominent motivation for Japan's commitment to Afghanistan stems from a desire to show solidarity with the United States, though there are others.

**Victoria Tuke, Visiting Fellow at the Tokyo Foundation, explains why "The centrality of the US-Japan alliance to Japan is an important consideration regarding Afghanistan, but Japan's interests are broader than solely the alliance."**

Japan's role in Afghanistan's development can most clearly be seen in Tokyo's organization of international conferences. Japan hosted the first conference on Afghanistan in January 2002, just one month after the Taliban left Kabul, followed by additional international forums in 2003, 2006 and 2012. In addition, during the transitional Bonn Process, which sought to recreate a permanent Afghan government following the US-led invasion, Japanese observation teams and constitutional law experts were sent to monitor presidential parliamentary and provincial elections. Japan has also appointed a Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, a position held only in countries that have a major leading role in Afghanistan's reconstruction: the United States, Australia, Germany and the United Kingdom.

**Security Cooperation:** Despite discussion of Japan deploying troops into Afghanistan during the early years of the NATO-led operation, there is absolutely no prospect in the near future of Japan sending its military forces to Afghanistan. This is despite the fact that there have been incremental increases in Japan's role in other UN-sanctioned peace-keeping operations—including the deployment of troops to South Sudan in March 2012. Yet Japan has taken a leading role in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) efforts and the disbanding of illegal armed groups (DIAG) in Afghanistan. When the DDR project ended in 2006, some 60,000 former Taliban soldiers had participated resulting in 276,000 weapons taken out of circulation. Furthermore, by contributing to the salaries of police officers and providing literacy programs for the Afghan National Army, Japan is indirectly contributing to security. Japan also contributes \$52 million to a NATO/Partnership for Peace (PfP) Trust Fund, which works to improve the management and physical security of ammunitions, build provincial reconstruction centers and assist in landmine clearance.

**Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) Projects:** Other Japanese ODA projects follow a more traditional profile. Japan has funded the building of a new international terminal at Kabul airport and—with the goal of improving the rule of law—funded the construction of judicial facilities around the country. Education has been another focus for Japanese ODA, with over 800 schools constructed or restored. Looking towards future generations of Afghan leaders, Japan pledged in June 2012 to grant 500 scholarships for Afghan students to pursue higher education in Japan. ODA into Grass-

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Roots Human Security Projects (GAGP) have also included the construction and development of health clinics, hospitals and training of medical staff. In the agricultural sector, the focus has been on improving irrigation, productivity and storage, with particular attention to female empowerment.

**“In summary, even though there are significant challenges ahead, there can be little doubt that Japan’s considerable contributions towards Afghanistan’s reconstruction will remain in demand for years to come.”**

**Demonstrating Solidarity with the United States:** As stated above, a primary motivation for Japan’s commitment to Afghanistan stems from a desire to show solidarity with the United States. While not always evident in public discourse, Japanese bureaucratic elites and politicians are very aware of the benefits for good relations with Washington. Yet to consider Japan’s role as merely one of following in the US slipstream neglects the domestic factors present in the Japanese policymaking process. In September 2001, immediately after the 9/11 attacks, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi passed the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law which enabled deployment of Japan’s Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) vessels to the Indian Ocean to partake in refueling operations supporting US-led operations in Afghanistan. President George W. Bush applauded this Japanese action—a role that according to Japanese officials provided a perfect “low risk, low cost, high return” opportunity for Japan.

However, then president of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), Ichiro Ozawa, opposed the Japanese mission arguing that it supported US unilateralism as US actions had not been endorsed by the UN Security Council. When the DPJ came to power in September 2009, within two weeks the fueling activities were terminated, and Japan offered instead \$5 billion in economic development aid over the next five years.

**Broader Considerations:** In stark contrast to Japanese ODA projects elsewhere, Japan foresees little prospect for economic investment in Afghanistan’s economy. Despite speculation about potential mineral resources, Japan currently has no direct investment initiatives in Afghanistan and the Japanese government actively discourages moves in that direction. In addition, Japanese companies are by nature extremely cautious, and at this moment in time Afghanistan is just too high-risk. However, Japan has consistently expressed interest in Afghanistan’s future, and offered to host talks between Afghan warring parties back in 1996 when the Taliban first seized Kabul. And since late 2001, Japan has been prepared to engage in what former Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa described as “an active role in the peace process and in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.”

On the whole, Afghanistan is not considered by Japanese politicians or the wider population as a direct security threat. Whilst 24 Japanese nationals lost their lives in the 9/11 attacks, the risk of Al-Qaeda operatives targeting Japan is considered to be extremely low. Even following the 2002 Bali bombings in Indonesia which targeted foreigners, Afghanistan is not deemed a direct threat to Japan. And despite the substantial monetary sums donated by the Japanese government to Afghanistan, Japanese domestic public interest and awareness of their role there is relatively small.

From the perspective of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in particular, Afghanistan represents part of a larger initiative for Japan to act as a responsible international citizen, which in turn contributes to Japan’s aspirations for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Furthermore, as a result of Japan’s role in Afghanistan, relations between Japan and NATO have developed considerably.

**Conclusion:** The centrality of the US-Japan alliance to Japan is an important consideration regarding Afghanistan, but Japan’s interests are broader than solely the alliance. They also include Japan’s role on the international stage and its bid for a seat on the UN Security Council. In summary, even though there are significant challenges ahead, there can be little doubt that Japan’s considerable contributions towards Afghanistan’s reconstruction will remain in demand for years to come.

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