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Asia Policy, Number 17, January 2014, pp. 59-65 (Article)

Published by National Bureau of Asian Research

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2014.0011>

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Japanese Assistance in Afghanistan: Helping the United States, Acting Globally, and Making a Friend

Kuniko Ashizawa

Although Japan has rarely been mentioned in regular international or U.S. news coverage on Afghanistan, the Japanese government has been a major player in international assistance for Afghanistan over the past decade. In early 2002, just a few months after the fall of the Taliban, it hosted the first major international conference on the reconstruction of Afghanistan, effectively setting up the prototype of the so-called pledging conference for Afghan reconstruction that has been subsequently held in other major capitals at two-year intervals. Ten years later, Tokyo convened another major conference that critically coordinated international assistance for Afghanistan through the 2014 transition period and beyond until 2016.

This essay provides a brief overview of Japan's major engagements in Afghanistan, identifies the key motivations behind them, and assesses their impact in terms of Tokyo's foreign policy objectives. Given that Japan has conducted its Afghan policymaking largely, though not exclusively, in the context of U.S.-Japan alliance management, the winding down of this signature decade-long foreign policy commitment is inevitable after 2014, when most of the U.S. and wider NATO forces withdraw from Afghanistan.

Japanese Engagement in Afghanistan

Japan assumed the “lead country” role for one of the five major security-sector reform programs—the so-called DDR program to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate former combatants into Afghan society—that were introduced as the main pillars of Afghan reconstruction and stabilization. The assumption of this role effectively positioned Japan as a principal player in international assistance in Afghanistan, alongside the United States (which assumed the lead-country role for re-establishing the Afghan military), Germany (for police reform), the United Kingdom (for counternarcotics), and Italy (for judicial reform). Although constitutional and other domestic political constraints prevented Japan from participating in the U.S.-led counterterrorism military operation (Operation Enduring

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Freedom) and the NATO-led security assistance mission (the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF), Tokyo came up with a creative way to enable its military to contribute. From late 2001 until the beginning of 2010, naval ships from the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) were deployed in the Indian Ocean to refuel U.S. and other international naval vessels engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom. The total operation cost amounted to \$800 million, with around \$250 million spent on supplying fuel and water to coalition forces.¹

Besides such diplomatic activism and unprecedented operations by the SDF, the most significant element of Japan's involvement in Afghanistan has been its substantial financial contribution to help stabilize and reconstruct this war-torn society. Since late 2001, Japan has spent almost \$5 billion on various reconstruction and stabilization projects in Afghanistan. Overall, Japan ranks second, after only the United States, in financial assistance to the country, with its pledges totaling about \$8 billion.² Close to half of Japanese aid was disbursed for reconstruction assistance, such as infrastructure building, agriculture and rural development, and health and education improvement, while one-third was directed toward security-related programs, most notably supporting the salary of Afghan police and the aforementioned DDR projects. The rest—somewhere between 20% and 25%—was spent on projects to improve governance and on humanitarian assistance. A conspicuously large amount of Japanese financial assistance—more than 60%—was channeled through international organizations, such as the UN Development Programme, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Food Programme, while about one-third was disbursed as direct bilateral grants to the Afghan government or NGOs providing official development assistance. Japan's own NGO, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), has handled only 9% of

¹ Based on data from National Diet Library, Foreign and Defense Policy Division, "Tero tokusoho no kigenencho o meguru ronten: Dai 168-kai rinji kokkai no shingi no tamen" [Issues Concerning the Extension of the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law: For the 168th Special Diet Session], Chousa to Jouho [Issue Brief], no. 594, September 20, 2007, 12; and Ministry of Defense (Japan), *Terotaisaku kaijoshienkatsudo nitaishuru hokyushienkatsudo no jishshi ni kansuru tokubestusochiho nimotozuku hokyushienkatsudo no kekka* [Report on SDF's Refueling Operation in support of Operation Enduring Freedom—Maritime Interdiction Operation under the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures] (Tokyo, 2010), appendix 1-2.

² Ministry of Finance (Aghanistan), "Development Cooperation Report 2011" (Kabul, 2012), 48; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), *Nihon no Ahuganisutan eno shien: jiritsushita Ahuganisutan ni mukete* [Japan's Assistance in Afghanistan: Toward Self-Reliance] (Tokyo, 2013), 2.

Japanese financial aid (in the form of technical assistance for the Afghan government's development projects).³

Japan's Goals in Afghanistan

What motivated Japan to make such a major diplomatic, security, and financial commitment to Afghanistan? The Japanese government has viewed its active involvement in the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan in terms of three separate yet interrelated goals. First, Japan's high-profile engagement was expected to help manage and strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance. Given that Afghanistan had become a top priority for the United States' national security and foreign policy after September 11, the Japanese government clearly recognized the need to get involved in Afghanistan in order to serve as a responsible ally. The concern over growing instability in Northeast Asia, thanks to both an increasingly erratic North Korea and the rise of China, compelled then prime minister Junichiro Koizumi to take prompt and decisive actions in support of the United States in its global war on terrorism. Furthermore, when the newly elected Democratic Party of Japan, in late 2009, sought to reverse the relocation agreement covering U.S. bases in Okinawa, Japanese policymakers attempted to further beef up the country's Afghan assistance by pledging to boost aid by \$5 billion over the next five years in the hope that it would help mitigate the unusually high level of tension with Washington.

Second, Tokyo's participation in international assistance to Afghanistan was also driven by its long-standing desire to demonstrate Japan's capacity to contribute to a major international peace and security operation. The embarrassment that the Japanese government endured during the first Gulf War, when its financial contribution of \$13 billion was criticized as too slow and derided as checkbook diplomacy, had not yet faded in the minds of Japanese policymakers when the U.S.-led military operation began in Afghanistan in late 2001. This memory spurred Japanese policymakers to seek timely and appropriate measures at the outset of the Afghan intervention. Japan's constitutional inability to participate directly in either Operation Enduring Freedom or the ISAF operation provided a

³ These figures are based on statistics and data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), "ODA kunibestu deta bukku: Afuganisutan" [ODA Data by Country: Afghanistan], 2002, 2004–12; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), *Nihon no Ahuganisutan eno shien: Jiritsushita Ahuganisutan ni mukete* [Japan's Assistance in Afghanistan: Toward Self-Reliance] (Tokyo, 2012).

further inducement for Tokyo to maintain a high level of commitment to Afghanistan, though primarily via financial measures.

The third and final objective of the Japanese government's support for Afghan reconstruction and stabilization was forging a good relationship with a newly reborn Afghanistan. Situated at the edge of greater Asia, Afghanistan has been considered a distant Asian country. Tokyo and Kabul historically enjoyed positive diplomatic interactions, primarily through Japan's decent level of economic assistance, until the rise of the Taliban regime. The widespread perception in Afghanistan of Japan as a politically and strategically neutral actor compared with other major donor countries—most notably, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia—was regarded by Japanese policymakers as a major advantage for reviving the amicable relationship in order to secure a new friend in a place of geostrategic significance at the opposite end of Asia.

Given that multiple actors were involved in Japan's assistance to Afghanistan, these three separate objectives were not necessarily shared in equal weight by all Japanese policymakers and practitioners. Political leaders and Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials in Tokyo often focused on the first and second objectives, whereas Japanese diplomats at the embassy in Kabul and JICA officials and practitioners in Afghanistan tended to place more emphasis on the third goal. Nonetheless, there is a general consensus in the Japanese government that these three objectives provided the overarching rationale for making major commitments to Afghanistan's reconstruction and stabilization.

Assessing Japanese Assistance

From the perspective of these three foreign policy objectives, it can be safely said that the Japanese government has achieved reasonable success. Japan's Afghan assistance has served as a major, and at times the only, positive subject in Washington-Tokyo political dialogue over the past decade. As the second-largest financial contributor to Afghan stabilization and reconstruction, Tokyo has been able to play an indispensable role in a major global security operation, while its assistance activities have been, on balance, well appreciated by both the Afghan government and general population—thanks, to an extent, to the lack of a Japanese military presence on the ground. Yet if considered in terms of Afghan stabilization and reconstruction, which is presumably the common goal committed to by all international actors, the success of Japan's assistance is by no means

obvious. This is partly because it is quite difficult to properly—and in a relatively short time period—assess the impact of assistance from any one donor on the overall stabilization and reconstruction of such a highly unstable and underdeveloped country as Afghanistan. This is also because, like many other donors, Japan has not been free from criticism for its handling of assistance funds and projects. For instance, Japanese projects, especially JICA's technical assistance, were often viewed as lacking flexibility and dynamism and as incapable of providing the timely and quick-impact assistance necessary for effective stabilization and reconstruction efforts in a country like Afghanistan.

A noteworthy but not widely known aspect of Japan's Afghan assistance that can be viewed as a positive development in the country's overall diplomacy is the sudden growth of bilateral cooperation between Japan and other donor countries in coordinating and implementing programs in Afghanistan. Japan has set up unique arrangements with several NATO members to provide financial support for their reconstruction projects as part of the NATO-led stabilization and counterinsurgency operations. These countries formed relatively small military-command units, consisting of military officers and soldiers, diplomats, and reconstruction and development experts, which are termed provincial reconstruction teams (PRT). Japan has financed more than 140 reconstruction and development projects undertaken by sixteen PRTs, led by specific NATO member countries, including Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Sweden, and most importantly the United States. In addition to providing financial support, Japan dispatched a handful of development practitioners to help a Lithuanian-led PRT in a central province of Afghanistan.

Furthermore, Japan has been collaborating with other non-Western donors, such as South Korea, Turkey, Russia, Singapore, and even Iran, in the area of capacity-building assistance that provides administrative training to Afghan government officials. For instance, JICA and its Korean counterpart, the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), collaborated on training programs for Afghan officials at a newly established (and Korean-funded) vocational training center in Kabul. Likewise, since 2011, Japan has provided financial support for an annual six-month training program for Afghan police officers at a Turkish police training center in Sivas, Turkey. Japan has similar arrangements with Russia (training Afghan police officials in the area of counternarcotics), Iran (supporting Afghan officials in charge of agriculture, border control management, and vocational training), and Indonesia and Cambodia (training officials on health administration).

Such cooperation with a range of donors has been partly born out of practical necessity. The deteriorating security environment in Afghanistan has increasingly constrained JICA's field activities, which has led Japanese officials to seek new measures to meet the assistance goals Japan set and keep its pledge. At the same time, Tokyo has sought to strengthen political and strategic ties with particular donor counterparts, especially NATO member countries, with which Japan's bilateral interactions had hitherto been modest. The government has also collaborated with European multilateral organizations like the European Union and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in areas such as border-control management in Afghanistan and its neighboring countries. Furthermore, over the past several years, Japan has sought similar kinds of bilateral collaboration with India, which is now the fifth-largest donor country for Afghan reconstruction and stabilization. Indeed, Afghan assistance has been a regular item on the agenda at high-level meetings between Japan and India since the mid-2000s, as well as in new trilateral consultations among senior officials from India, Japan, and the United States, which were established in late 2011.

On balance, the Japanese government has been able to manage its major involvement in Afghanistan reasonably well, especially in terms of achieving its foreign policy objectives. Despite the substantial amount of taxpayer money spent on a faraway country, assistance to Afghanistan has not yet generated significant controversy in Japanese domestic politics, in sharp contrast with the situation in the United States. Such relatively favorable circumstances notwithstanding, with the 2014 deadline looming large for a major, and possibly full, reduction of the U.S. and wider NATO military engagement in Afghanistan, Japanese policymakers now appear to be preparing for a winding down of the country's signature foreign policy commitment over the past decade. Since September 2012, two months after the second Tokyo conference on Afghan reconstruction, the Japanese government no longer has assigned a high-ranking diplomat to serve exclusively as a special envoy to Afghanistan (and Pakistan), functioning as the counterpart of the U.S. special representative for those countries; instead, the head of the Middle Eastern and African Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs now concurrently holds the portfolio for this position. In addition, since coming to power, the current Japanese leadership, under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of the Liberal Democratic Party, has made few public remarks on assistance to Afghanistan.

Given that Japan's engagement with Afghanistan occurred in large part in the context of U.S.-Japan alliance management, this is hardly surprising. When the United States' interest wanes, so does Japan's. In this regard, although Japanese officials involved in Afghan assistance invariably have stressed their commitment to fulfilling Japan's latest pledge of another \$3 billion toward the end of 2016, there is a tacit agreement in the government that maintaining this level of financial aid after 2016 is simply not an option. Thus, a major change in Japan's assistance for the reconstruction and stabilization of Afghanistan will be inevitable. At the same time, however, Japan's complete withdrawal from the country is highly unlikely. Most Japanese policymakers and officials expect that Tokyo will continue providing a certain level of financial assistance to Kabul. This is partly because Japan's two other foreign policy goals—demonstrating its contribution to global security and forging a good relationship with Afghanistan as a distant Asian friend—will still have some validity. This expectation also reflects a sentiment shared by many Japanese officials that all the efforts and investments their country has made in Afghanistan should not end in vain. Given the real risk that Afghanistan will slide back into chaos after the 2014 transition, only sustained international support can prevent Japan's significant contributions over the past decade from going to waste. ♦