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## Japan's Approach to Building Peace: A Critical Appraisal and the Way Forward

BY KUNIKO ASHIZAWA

On the eve of President Obama's first visit to Asia in early November 2009, the new Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)-led government announced a new assistance package to Afghanistan amounting to US\$5 billion over the next five years to support reconstruction and stabilization. Although the announcement was overshadowed by growing discord between Tokyo and Washington over the relocation of U.S. bases in Okinawa, it nonetheless received an overall warm reception both internationally and domestically. Since late 2001, Japan has contributed nearly US\$2 billion in aid to Afghanistan. This new package will, in effect, quadruple Japan's annual assistance, making it the second largest financial contributor to Afghanistan's reconstruction among individual donor states after the United States.

**Kuniko Ashizawa, visiting fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that "A major increase in its financial contribution was the main option available to the Japanese government to demonstrate its continued and substantial commitment to Afghan reconstruction."**

It is no secret that Tokyo's new level of generosity for Afghanistan was driven primarily by the need to compensate for its prior decision to discontinue the Self-Defense Forces (SDF)'s six-year mission in the Indian Ocean to refuel U.S. and NATO vessels engaged in counter-terrorism operations. Further complicating the matter is the inclusion of the Socialist Party in the ruling coalition, a party that routinely opposes Japanese military activities abroad. Prime Minister Hatoyama therefore needed to avoid any possible role for the SDF in Afghan reconstruction. Accordingly, a major increase in its financial contribution was the main option available to the Japanese government to demonstrate its continued and substantial commitment to Afghan reconstruction. Further, Tokyo hoped that this would lead to more favorable relations with Washington, as the bilateral relationship had noticeably strained since the DPJ came to power in August 2009.

Whatever its recent motives may be, Japan has exerted major leadership in international efforts to rebuild Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime. In early 2002, Tokyo hosted the first major conference among leading donors to support a recovery plan for Afghanistan, for which the participants committed US\$5.2 billion in non-military aid over five years. The Japanese government assumed the role of "lead country" for the DDR (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration) of ex-combatants program, which facilitated the transition of more than 63,000 former combatants. By 2006, Japan led in financially supporting a new Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) program, in which some 670 illegal armed groups were disbanded. Japan has also funded and provided technical advice to numerous reconstruction and humanitarian projects in Afghanistan, in areas including education (school construction and teacher training), health (clinic construction and water supply), agriculture and rural development (technical assistance and vocational training), and security (salary assistance for Afghan policemen and police training).



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It is important to note that Tokyo has commonly labeled its foreign policy activities in Afghanistan as “peacebuilding,” rather than closely associating them with the country’s participation in the war on global terrorism. Peacebuilding is a relatively new concept which has evolved through international political discourse and the actual practice of the United Nations in conflict-affected countries. Encompassing a comprehensive approach to global security, peacebuilding often refers to the following four phases for dealing with international conflicts: conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and post-conflict reconstruction and development. In practice, it calls for a more focused and long-term commitment to build sustainable indigenous capacities for improved conflict management through political, legal, and security sector reforms, as well as socio-economic development tools.

Japan has been a leading proponent of the peacebuilding approach. As observed in the country’s extensive assistance to post-conflict Cambodia and East Timor over the past decade, Tokyo practiced peacebuilding well before the term became standard in international political discourse. Since the early 2000s, the Japanese government has designated peacebuilding as a key subject area in its overall foreign policymaking, and accordingly, it undertook a series of initiatives to assist development and governance capacity-building in conflict-prone, fragile states—not only in Asia (e.g., Mindanao, Aceh, and Sri Lanka) but also in other regions, most notably in Africa (e.g., Sudan, Sierra Leone, and the Congo). Further, Japan launched a training center to prepare civilians (both Japanese and other Asian citizens) for service in international peacebuilding activities in 2006. It was also closely involved in the newly-established UN Peacebuilding Commission as a major financial contributor and by serving as Chair of the Commission in 2007 and 2008.

Admittedly, peacebuilding activities receive only secondary attention compared to the military or peacekeeping components of post-conflict reconstruction operations. Military engagement, which Japan rarely participates in due to constitutional restrictions on the SDF, is surely critical to bringing stability to war-torn societies, especially during the early stages of a post-conflict reconstruction effort. Yet, as seen in the current debate over U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, there is a growing voice that questions the utility of militaristic responses and privileges increased development and governance assistance for Afghans. In this sense, Japan’s growing activism in peacebuilding, not just in Afghanistan but elsewhere, deserves a proper appraisal.

Meanwhile, given the considerable development and governance challenges inherent to post-conflict nations, there is certainly more to be done with Tokyo’s peacebuilding assistance policy. Japan needs to examine more critically the effectiveness of its past and current assistance programs. It also needs to seek more consciously to maximize the overall impact of the diverse number of assistance programs within a particular recipient country. And more significantly, Japan, in concert with other major donor countries and aid agencies, should seriously explore a new mechanism beyond the current limited and ad hoc efforts of the United Nations in Afghanistan and other war-torn countries to coordinate their respective aid programs in order to avoid duplication, introduce an appropriate division of labor and increased economies of scale, and collectively pressure a host country to assume responsibility for its state-building. As the current political climate surrounding the Hatoyama government will likely keep Japan from pursuing military options in the global security arena for some time, taking on a major initiative for international aid coordination could help the country to avoid revived international criticism that Japan is merely playing “checkbook diplomacy” without making a substantive contribution to global security.