



# Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 170 | July 3, 2012

## Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan: Japanese Leadership at a Critical Juncture

BY KUNIKO ASHIZAWA

Future observers will likely agree that 2012 was a milestone year in the contemporary history of Afghanistan and for the surrounding regions of Central and South Asia. With the 2014 deadline for a major drawdown of the US-led NATO military mission looming, Afghanistan's government and its international donor partners have been accelerating efforts to devise measures to prevent this war-torn country from descending into chaos. Agreement was reached at the NATO summit in Chicago in May to transfer lead security responsibility from the NATO-led international forces to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)—including a commitment by donors to continue financial support and training to the ANSF beyond 2014. Next week, on July 8, representatives of more than eighty countries and international organizations, including US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and UN General-Secretary Ban Ki-moon, will convene in Tokyo to discuss the coordination of international economic assistance for Afghanistan through the 2014 transition and beyond.

**Kuniko Ashizawa**, Senior Lecturer in International Relations at Oxford Brookes University and Visiting Fellow at the Reischauer Center, SAIS, explains that “Compared with other major donors, like the United States and United Kingdom, Japan is viewed by many Afghans as a neutral actor, both strategically and politically. This is due, in part, to the fact that Japan does not have a military presence in Afghanistan.”

Japan's leadership on international economic assistance is critical. Although its name rarely appears in regular news coverage, Japan is second, after the United States, in total monetary and development assistance to Afghanistan; Japan's pledges, since 2002, total US\$7.2 billion. Tokyo has placed strong emphasis on reconstruction and development, rather than on military contributions. A decade ago, Japan hosted the first major international conference on the reconstruction of Afghanistan, establishing the prototype of the so-called “pledging conferences” that were subsequently hosted in Berlin, London, and Paris at two-year intervals. Tokyo is therefore a natural choice for an international conference at this critical juncture regarding Afghanistan's immediate and medium-term economic and reconstruction development. Furthermore, the future of Afghanistan and the stability of the surrounding region will significantly—though not exclusively—depend on the Japanese government's vision and diplomacy for the Tokyo Conference.

Japan is in an advantageous position to undertake this important, yet daunting, task. Compared with other major donors, like the United States and United Kingdom, Japan is viewed by many Afghans as a neutral actor, both strategically and politically. This is due, in part, to the fact that Japan does not have a military presence in Afghanistan. Its generous financial contributions over the past decade provide Tokyo with good political leverage vis-à-vis Kabul, and also with other donor partners. Tokyo can guide these multiple actors with divergent, and often competing, interests toward reaching substantive and meaningful agreements. Moreover, the Japanese emphasis on “politically neutral” reconstruction and economic development projects, as opposed to the more “intrusive” security, human rights, and governance initiatives undertaken by others, gives Japan increased creditability in the eyes of influential Afghan power brokers.

Taking into account these advantages, what does the Japanese government aim to achieve? It is widely agreed that the Tokyo Conference will need to devise a well-defined and



**“A successful Tokyo Conference will serve as a testament of Japan’s unique position to contribute to global security.”**

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

economically sound blueprint for both Afghanistan and international donors to implement collectively. The US-led drawdown will inevitably be accompanied by a substantial reduction in financial assistance resulting in a possible four percent reduction in Afghanistan’s GDP according to the World Bank. Thus, the blueprint has to make provisions to empower the Afghan government with the necessary resources to successfully absorb the negative security, social, and economic fall-outs as a result of such a drastic cut in government revenues. Simultaneously, it needs to lay the foundations for the country’s long-term development to continue transforming itself into a state that is internally secure and not a threat to the international community. Putting forth such a blueprint, and getting all stakeholders on board, will involve at least three tasks.

*First*, the Japanese government, in coordination with other donors, should help the Afghan government prioritize a select number of near to medium-term development projects. These projects should cut across key sectors such as agriculture and rural development, and include natural resources, energy, transportation, and private sector development.

*Second*, in order to secure a sustained commitment from donors for these priority projects, the conference needs to introduce a comprehensive set of concrete and time-bound measures to reform and strengthen Afghanistan’s governing institutions, ranging from fiscal management to the rule of law and anti-corruption. It should also ensure that the Afghan government fully and sincerely takes measures to implement these reforms.

*Third*, the Tokyo Conference will need to reinvigorate mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating progress for commitments made both by the Afghan government and by donors. Given that agreements at previous conferences on Afghanistan’s reconstruction over the past decade were only partially followed through, such measures are especially crucial to avoid the recurrence of past problems.

Obviously, accomplishing these three tasks is far easier said than done. It requires a careful and thoughtful diplomatic and political balancing act of skillful persuasion and thorough consultation with Kabul and other actors to ensure that the blueprint ultimately agreed upon in Tokyo is fully embraced by the Afghan government. Likewise, in order to secure the commitment of donors, the blueprint will have to adequately address their legitimate concerns regarding internal Afghan security and governance deficiencies.

These vast and complicated challenges notwithstanding, Japan has every reason to invest significant diplomatic capital in achieving a concrete and resolute road map for Afghan economic development. A successful Tokyo Conference will serve as a testament of Japan’s unique position to contribute to global security. It will also bring a major boost to Tokyo’s relations with Washington, by assisting the latter’s drawdown strategy from Afghanistan. To that end, Japan should consciously support Washington’s one-year-old initiative, known as the “New Silk Road.” This proposal aims to strategically integrate Afghanistan—through transnational infrastructures such as rail, road and energy pipelines and improving trade facilitation mechanisms including custom standardization and transit agreements—into the economies of Central and South Asia. Not only does the New Silk Road make substantive economic rationale, but it also provides new opportunities for Tokyo to cooperate—not necessarily in an overt manner—with Washington in these two distinct Asian sub-regions. Clearly, Central and South Asia are gaining in geopolitical and geo-economic importance, especially when taking into consideration the rapid expansion of China’s regional influence in recent years.

Finally, and to put it bluntly, a successful Tokyo Conference may be the only way to prevent Japan’s significant financial contribution and those of other donors—not to mention lives lost, both by Afghans and coalition forces—from going to waste. Failure at this conference will almost preordain Afghanistan’s certain slide back into chaos and large-scale violence after the 2014 transition.