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Japan's Stakes in the Afghanistan Crisis

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Abstract

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, just after the withdrawal of US-led troops, will have ramifications in Japan's activities in the region. Since 2001, Japan has provided 759 billion yen (USD6.9 billion) to reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. This, despite the fact that Japan does not share geographical proximity with Afghanistan and therefore has no

direct strategic interests in the country. To be sure, Japan's partners such as the US and India have strong interests in Afghanistan—and these influence Japan's own policies. This report outlines Japan's concerns in the region since Kabul fell to the Taliban.

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Japan's Afghanistan Assistance

Japan's most recent assistance to Afghanistan started after the US intervention in 2001.¹ Since then, Japan has provided 759 billion yen (approximately USD6.9 billion) to global reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.² Japan has provided support in three domains: security support; economic support; and value-related support.

Security support

Re-establishing peace in Afghanistan has been the most important purpose of Japan's support. Since the intervention of the Soviet Union in 1979,

Afghanistan has been at war. After Soviet troops withdrew in 1989, the country experienced civil war between clan warlords, and many war crimes were committed by their members. By 1997, the Taliban had started to emerge as a strong force and succeeded in occupying Kabul. Under the Taliban regime, Afghanistan provided a safe harbour to the Al-Qaeda, and from its soil, the group would plan the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001. Since then, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) troops, including the US, have fought the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Security support was the first imperative in attempting to bring peace in Afghanistan and reviving the economy. Key to doing this was disarming soldiers of military cliques and giving them training so that they would be able to join the regular workforce. These former soldiers knew how to use guns but many of them never learned how to read, or how to work in peacetime. Training and educating the police was also an issue, as many of them similarly never had the chance to learn basic literacy. Under the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Japan has spent nearly USD40 million since 2002 in these efforts at rehabilitating former soldiers. Japan also invested in a new police force in Afghanistan, including for the education of its members.

Economic support

Japan has made significant contributions to efforts at reviving Afghanistan's economy. To prevent Afghans from joining terrorist organisations, the programmes aimed at creating employment for the people. Under Taliban rule, 90 percent of opium production in the world came from Afghanistan; this caused societal harm. The international community, including Japan, was aware of the urgency of the situation and worked to create a strong economy.

First, Japan worked to remove land mines. According to data from 2003, 10 million land mines were scattered across the country's 800-sq-km land area, and more than 300 died every month from mine blasts. Clearing those land mines was vital to any effort at recovery, and Japan donated funds and developed new machines to remove them. It also built highway projects between Kabul to cities like Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Jalalabad, and Bamiyan. It gave financing for infrastructure projects, including roads and water supply lines; it was instrumental in establishing clean water systems in these cities. Japan also supported the reconstruction of the international airport in Kabul by building a new terminal, supplying equipment, and training workers for maintenance work.

Agriculture is an especially important component of the economy in Afghanistan. Japan recognised this, and focused on building irrigation systems and sharing information about how to use them. Perhaps the most well-known face of Japanese assistance in this regard was Tetsu Nakamura—a physician who led various developments efforts in different areas of Afghanistan, including turning desert areas into wheat farmlands. In December 2019, he was assassinated along with his bodyguard and driver; the main suspect, according to officials, was a member of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. Afghans held vigils in his honour following his death.

Value-related support

When the 9/11 terrorist attacks happened in the United States in 2001, the Taliban governed and sheltered Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. They ruled the country in a manner that was different from other Muslim nations. They laid down stringent rules for the people to follow in their everyday life: they prohibited activities like music, sports, movies, kite-flying; ordered men to grow their beard; disallowed women from engaging in public life, working, attending school, and stepping out of their house without a male relative companion and full-body covering. Indeed, women in particular, suffered under the Taliban regime. Even if, for example, a woman was ill and needed to go to the hospital, they could not enter the ward if men were present. The Taliban established the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice and punished many through public executions.

Many countries stepped in to make attempts at reform. Japan, for example, started projects for raising literacy rates, established universities in Kabul, and made existing educational facilities accessible to both men and women. A TV station in Afghanistan was established in 1976 and was supported by Japan at the time. In 2003, Japan also helped reestablish certain forms of mass media. To assist in the revival of democratic institutions, Japan also lent its support to elections in the country. Japan was similarly active in the healthcare sector.

To reduce maternal and infant mortality, Japan introduced its well-established Mother-Child Health Handbook system to record and monitor the health of both mothers and their children.

Japan's Rationale

Japan's current efforts in Afghanistan started after the US intervention in 2001.³ Simply said, Japan took an economic role in the US operation as an ally of the United States. It had a pragmatic reason to cooperate with the US. First, in the 9/11 terror attacks where 2,977 people lost their lives, 24 of them were Japanese citizens. Some years before that, in 1994, Al-Qaeda detonated a bomb in a Japanese commercial aircraft, killing one Japanese. A few years later, in 1997, Al-Qaeda attacked the Loxur Castle in Egypt, killing 10 Japanese. Most of them were newlyweds who were touring Egypt, and the event provoked intense anger among the Japanese public. And in 2004, Al-Qaeda killed one Japanese tourist who, defying warnings from the Japanese government, entered Iraq. Therefore, when the US made the decision to attack Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, Japan had a moral compulsion to cooperate with the US. Because of its security policy, however—embedded in the country's Constitution which restrains the use of military force in foreign countries—Japan's cooperation has focused on supporting US operations.

Japan had another reason to cooperate with the US. In 2001, the North Korean nuclear development program was the most important security threat facing Japan. Some years earlier, in 1998, North Korea tested a Taepondong ballistic missile, which flew over Japan and fell into the Pacific. Because Japan's security policy emphasises defense, Japan can intercept missiles but cannot itself destroy the missile base—for that task, it has to depend on the US military. Therefore, Japan acts as an ally and contributes to the US operation in Afghanistan because Japan needs US protection in the event of an attack from North Korea. This was the most fundamental logic of the Japan-US alliance. It was this alliance that provided the primary justification for Japan to intervene in the situation in Afghanistan.

At the same time, Japan has historical and cultural connections with Afghanistan. In 1931, Japan started formal diplomatic relations with

Afghanistan. After the Second World War, Japan opened its embassy in Kabul in 1955. The embassy was closed during the Soviet occupation between 1979–1989 and during the Taliban occupation between 1997–2001. It remained open until the Taliban takeover in August 2021, and closed down thereafter. Regardless of its embassy's status, Japan has supported Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries for a long time. The Japanese people also have a cultural connection with the Afghans. In 2001 when the Taliban destroyed the 6th-century Bamiyan Buddha monumental statues, Japan issued a strongly worded statement condemning the destruction. Because of these linkages, the Japanese people have an emotional desire to help in reconstructing peace in Afghanistan.

Japan's Current Concerns

From the perspective of the various interests outlined in this report, Japan has at least three current concerns in Afghanistan. These are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The future of Afghanistan

Japan has so far spent USD6.9 billion in reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. There is concern about what will happen to those who cooperated with Japan's assistance projects, now that Afghanistan has fallen back under Taliban rule. Recognising the sensitivity of the situation, Japan has not officially expressed criticism of the Taliban takeover. At the same time, however, some Japanese nationals and nearly 500 Afghan people who cooperated with Japan's projects are keen to leave Afghanistan. Japan has tried to set up

evacuation routes, dispatching three transport planes from the Japan Air Self-Defense Force in August to evacuate them. However, because of its long tradition of pacifism and reluctance to intervene in foreign conflicts, Japan's decision came too late. Just before these people arrived at the Kabul airport to board their aircraft and evacuate, a suicide bomber attacked the airport, killing 73 people, including 13 US troops and 60 Afghan civilians. After the attack, Japan decided to cease any attempts at evacuation. In total, Japan managed to evacuate only one Japanese and 14 Afghans.⁴ Since then, Japan has continued to negotiate with Taliban representatives in Qatar to evacuate the others.

Before the Taliban took over Kabul, there was little media attention in Japan about the situation in Afghanistan. Immediately following the fall of Kabul, the main Japanese TV channels were reporting on the situation in Afghanistan nearly every day in September and October 2021. At the time of writing this report, media coverage has waned. Yet there is continued interest in the future of the people in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. The concerns centre around three issues: 1) the human rights situation of the Afghan people, especially the women; 2) terrorist activities in Afghanistan; and 3) the preservation of shared cultural heritage, including in the form of Buddhism-related monuments and sites.

The direction of US strategy

Japan assisted Afghanistan in order to support the US. For this reason, Japan is concerned about the trajectory of US strategy. There are signs indicating that the Biden administration is facing many other security problems from other regions after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan—these include Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. If the US cannot concentrate on its China policy, it could hurt Japan's interests.

Initially, the US withdrew from Afghanistan to shift its resources from anti-terror operations to counter-China operations. When the US withdrew

on 31 August 2021, President Joe Biden said, “The world is changing. We’re engaged in a serious competition with China.... And there’s nothing China or Russia would rather have, would want more in this competition, than the United States to be bogged down another decade in Afghanistan.”⁵ However, since the Taliban took over Afghanistan just after the US withdrawal, the US has started to ease pressure on China. President Biden called Chinese President Xi Jinping on 10 September 2021 to discuss the holding of a summit with him.⁶ Top US advisers in the administration, including National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai, similarly reach out to their Chinese counterparts.

To be sure, President Biden initially avoided mentioning China by name in any of his public statements, including in his speech before the UN General Assembly on 21 September,⁷ and in the joint statement of the US-Australia summit on 24 September.⁸ Before August, there was a sentiment in the US to boycott the Winter 2022 Olympics in Beijing; there has been no such talk since September. These moves indicate a clear break with the policy before August.

For example, in March 2021, the joint statement of US-Japan mentioned China explicitly and expressed concern very clearly. By November 2021, President Biden had restarted criticising China in his remarks.

The global situation has also worsened since the US withdrawal. All at the same time, Russia has gathered its troops near the eastern border with Ukraine, Iran has accelerated its nuclear development program, North Korea has launched missiles, and China has been making aggressive moves toward Taiwan.

What happened in the interim? It is possible that the US is in “Afghanistan shock.” After all, the US has spent 20 years supporting the Afghan government. When the Taliban took over just after the US withdrew, it brought up questions about the entire US strategy and caused Washington to lose confidence in its own foreign policy. From the perspective of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, this is their chance to achieve their goals. Because Japan wants the US to pursue a strong policy toward China, such “Afghanistan shock” is concerning.

The direction of India

Along with US policy, Japan is also concerned about India’s stance toward China after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. If India needs to expend more resources to deal with Afghanistan-related issues, will it still have enough resources for its counter-China strategy? Can the Quadrilateral partnership between India, the US, Japan, and Australia still become effective as a counter-China strategy if India cannot contribute enough? This is a primary concern for Japan. There are three circumstances under which India would need to expend more resources on Afghanistan-related problems. First, if Afghanistan becomes a hotbed of terrorists, these groups can attack India.

Fatalities in Jammu and Kashmir caused by terrorist activities rose just after Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, and declined after the US intervention in 2001. There is a strong possibility that Pakistan will support terrorists relocating from Afghanistan to Kashmir. From this perspective, if Afghanistan becomes a hotbed of terrorists, attacks will rise in India. India needs to expend more resources to prepare for such an eventuality.

In turn, if Afghanistan indeed becomes a hotbed of terrorists, the situation in Pakistan will become a greater concern. For Pakistan, radical Islamic terrorists present a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Pakistan can use terrorists as a tool of its foreign policy. At the same time, these radical Islamic terrorists can wield influence inside Pakistan. Because Pakistan has nuclear weapons, there is concern that radical Islamic terrorists could possess them if they increase their influence in Pakistan. Given such serious concern, India needs to devote more resources to prepare a counter-Pakistan strategy.

Even if Afghanistan does not become a hotbed of terrorists, there is still concern for the security of India. If China supports Pakistan and the Taliban at the same time, India will face a formidable China-Pakistan-Taliban alliance. India will face China's incursion, Pakistan's provocation, and terrorist attacks at the same time. To counter this, India will need to channel more resources to land-based defense—this could potentially affect its ability to strengthen, or even maintain its maritime defenses. Therefore, whether India can share enough resources to strengthen maritime cooperation with the other members of the Quad will be a matter of significant concern for Japan.

“Japan is concerned that if India expends more resources to deal with Afghanistan-related issues, will it still have enough resources for a counter-China strategy?”


Prospects for Counter-China Strategies

As mentioned earlier in this report, Japan has spent USD6.9 billion on security, economic, and value-related assistance to Afghanistan over the last 20 years. The motivations have included a desire to support the US as an ally, assist in efforts to fight terrorist activities, and honour Japan's cultural and historical ties with the Afghans. However, with the Taliban takeover of Kabul, the efforts of the last 20 years could all simply come to an end. Today the Japanese are concerned about the future of Afghanistan and the counter-China strategies of the US and India.

The remaining question, therefore, is related to the US and India. Will the US and India need to change their long-term strategy against China? And will Japan follow the lead of the US and India in such a shift? There is a strong possibility that the

US, India, and Japan do not need to change their long-term counter-China strategies because the US withdrawal from Afghanistan will release the US from Pakistan. For a long time, the US needed to support Pakistan because it was an important supply line for US troops in Afghanistan. Since US troops have withdrawn from Afghanistan, the US no longer needs such cooperation. For India, US-Pakistan cooperation has for long been a source of trouble in relations with the US. If the US is less reliant on cooperation with Pakistan, it becomes easier for the US to side with India. Therefore, if India eventually faces a China-Pakistan-Taliban alliance, it can fall back on strong support from the US. If there is no conflict between the US and India, it is easier for Japan to support India, too.

In the short term, the US will need to cooperate with China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, and others in efforts to bring some stability to Afghanistan, and evacuate Afghans who cooperated with the US. Because of such diplomatic concerns, the US must be careful in deciding on a strong stance

toward China. However, in the long run, the US, India, and Japan, along with Australia, will strengthen their cooperation against China more definitively. 

“Will the US and India need to change their long-term strategy against China? And will Japan follow their lead?”

Endnotes

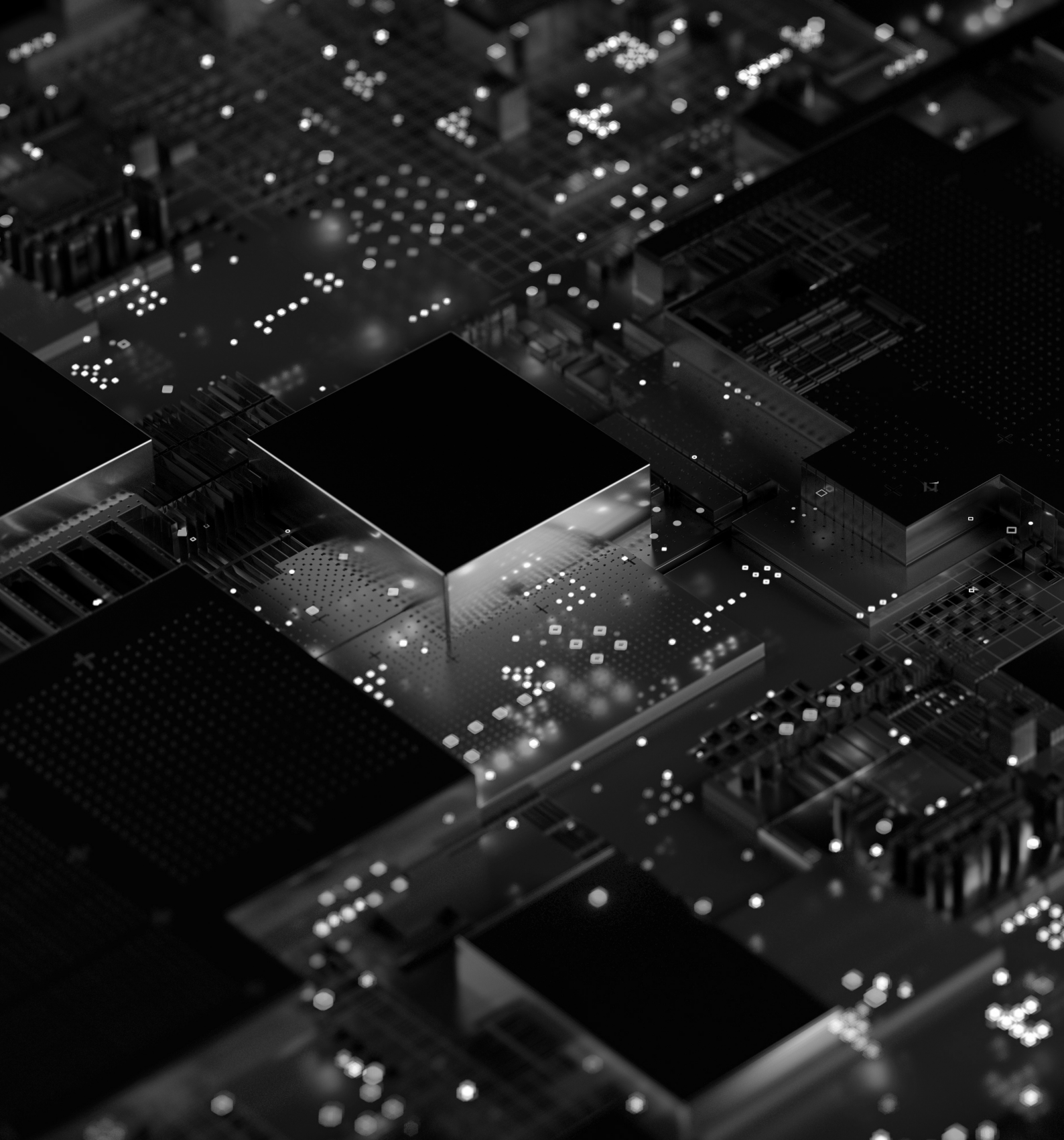
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