

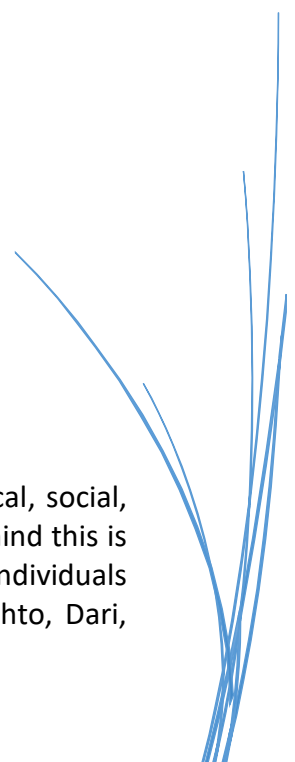
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AN OVERVIEW OF JAPAN'S RELATIONS AND AID TO AFGHANISTAN



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



AN OVERVIEW OF JAPAN'S RELATIONS AND AID TO AFGHANISTAN

Introduction

Recently, Japan has announced plans to construct 165 elementary schools in nine provinces of Afghanistan. Additionally, the Japanese ambassador in Kabul has expressed that his country seeks to facilitate dialogue between the G7 nations and the Islamic Emirate. This announcement follows more than two decades in which Japan, among Afghanistan's international partners, has emerged as the second-largest donor after the United States. During the Republic era, Japan provided approximately seven billion dollars in aid to Afghanistan. Even following the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate, Japan has retained its position as the largest donor, contributing nearly 500 million dollars over the past three years.

Japan's involvement in Afghanistan is particularly notable given the absence of security partnerships, military objectives, or significant economic interests in the country. This raises an important question: what drives Japan's continued focus on Afghanistan? Why has Afghanistan garnered such sustained attention from Japan? What explicit and underlying motivations underpin Japan's engagement? To address these questions, this article will examine Japan's strategic outlook and priorities concerning Afghanistan.

JAPAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON AFGHANISTAN

Japan's approach to Afghanistan is influenced by three primary factors.

1- Japan's Alliance with the United States

Since the end of World War II, Japan has relied on the United States for its security and military needs, solidifying this relationship through strategic and security agreements. Politically, Japan has also aligned itself closely with the U.S., adhering to its policies on global affairs. Consequently, the first major factor shaping Japan's perspective on Afghanistan is the U.S. stance toward the country. As a strategic ally of the U.S., Japan severed ties with Afghanistan during the communist regime in support of the Mujahideen's resistance against the Soviet invasion. During the Republic era in Afghanistan, Japan remained a key partner, aligning its policies with U.S. initiatives in the country. However, Japan refrained from direct military involvement, limiting its support to semi-military assistance, such as supplying fuel to U.S. forces in the Indian Ocean during the Afghanistan war, a practice it discontinued in 2009. Currently, Japan's stance on Afghanistan remains consistent with the U.S. approach, and Japan aligns itself with the broader international community led by the U.S. in making political decisions regarding Afghanistan.

2. Assistance to Developing and Poor Countries

Following World War II, Japan was prohibited by the U.S. from engaging in military activities beyond its borders. In response, Japan, as a developed and prosperous nation, adopted an economic approach to establish a presence in the international system and secure a favorable position in global affairs.



Through this strategy, Japan has gained prominence in international organizations and established itself as a major donor to developing nations, becoming the second-largest financial contributor to the United Nations after the U.S. and recognized as one of the leading global donors based on per capita contributions. In this context, Afghanistan has been viewed as a prime destination for Japan's economic aid and support. Japan has consistently sought to assist Afghanistan in various forms, seeing it as an opportunity to exert its influence and fulfill its role in international development.

3. Japan's Historical Perception of Afghanistan

Historically, Japan's awareness of Afghanistan dates back to 1872, when the name "Afghanistan" first appeared in a Japanese newspaper about the actions of Emir Sher Ali Khan. The following year, the Tokyo Nichi Shimbun published a report on Afghanistan, and in 1887, another Japanese newspaper, *Asahi Shimbun*, ran an extensive article on Bamiyan and the Buddha statues. Interestingly, before the formal establishment of relations between Japan and Afghanistan, Sardar Muhammad Ayub Khan (the victor of the Battle of Maiwand) became the first Afghan military and political figure to visit Japan in 1907 as an honorary guest at a celebration marking the victory of Asian powers over European forces.

Formal relations between Japan and Afghanistan were established after Afghanistan gained independence, through the exchange of non-resident representatives. Diplomatic ties were solidified with the signing of a Treaty of Friendship between the two nations in 1930, and Afghanistan opened its embassy in Tokyo the following year. The first official Japanese minister visited Afghanistan in 1934. Relations between the two countries were further strengthened in 1969 when King Mohammad Zahir Shah visited Japan, followed by a reciprocal visit by the Japanese emperor to Afghanistan. These exchanges deepened bilateral ties, resulting in significant Japanese assistance in technology and technical support, such as the installation and assembly of electrical devices, including televisions, as well as educational scholarships and participation in various projects.

Although Japan closed its embassy in Afghanistan twice—once during the Soviet invasion (1979-1989) and again from 1997 to 2001—Japan's historical connection to Afghanistan remained strong. Japan even attempted to mediate peace between the Taliban and opposition forces in 1997, though these efforts ultimately failed. Nevertheless, Japan's longstanding perception of Afghanistan has continued to shape its involvement in the country.

JAPAN'S PRIORITIES IN AFGHANISTAN

Every country that provides aid to others operates based on specific priorities, which it seeks to advance through its assistance programs. In many cases, conflicts arising from differing priorities between countries can lead to detrimental outcomes for the recipient nation, a reality vividly observed in Afghanistan. For example, aside from major powers such as the United States, Russia, and China, even Afghanistan's six neighboring countries each pursue divergent priorities within the country, often in opposition to one another. Japan, despite its political alignment and cooperation with the U.S. regarding Afghanistan, has maintained an independent policy in the country, one characterized by consistent support regardless of the prevailing political climate. Consequently, Japan has continued its



unwavering assistance to the Afghan people, both during and after the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, even intensifying its aid efforts in recent years.

Japan's foreign policy in Afghanistan is notably people-centric rather than regime-centric. This means that Japan's primary aim is not to support or oppose any particular political system but rather to provide aid to Afghanistan as a nation in need and to assist its people, regardless of the governing system. Over the past two decades under the Republic and during the three years of Islamic Emirate rule, Japan has demonstrated that it is not pursuing political influence in Afghanistan, nor has it entangled itself in the country's political factions. In other words, Japan's actions in Afghanistan have been remarkably impartial, driven by altruism without any apparent ulterior motives. From Japan's conduct in Afghanistan, several key priorities can be inferred, priorities which have also been explicitly articulated by Japanese officials.

1- Support for the Afghan People

Japan's foremost priority in providing aid to Afghanistan is to support its people. As previously noted, Japan's foreign policy toward Afghanistan is not contingent on the nature of the ruling political system but is focused on helping the Afghan population. Just as Japan provided billions of dollars in aid during the Republic era, it has continued this support under the Islamic Emirate. According to available data, Japan's aid to Afghanistan in the past three years has approached 500 million dollars.

2. Addressing the Immediate Needs of the Afghan Population

An analysis of Japan's aid to Afghanistan reveals that a significant portion of its assistance has been directed toward humanitarian relief aimed at addressing the immediate needs of the Afghan people. Following the return of the Islamic Emirate to power and the subsequent deterioration of the country's economy, Japan has sent substantial amounts of aid to Afghanistan. For example, in 2021 alone, Japan provided two major aid packages: the first, worth 190 million dollars, was delivered in October, and the second, worth 100 million dollars, was provided in December to help avert a humanitarian crisis. Additionally, in December 2022, Japan announced a further 100-million-dollar aid package for Afghanistan.

Due to the restrictions placed on the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in Afghanistan, most of the Japan's aid over the past three years has been channeled through international organizations, such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and other international agencies.

3. Aid for Infrastructure Development in Afghanistan

Another key area where Japan has allocated its assistance is in infrastructure development and various capacity-building initiatives. Japan has consistently reiterated a well-known principle in Afghanistan: "Instead of giving a person fish, teach them how to fish." With this philosophy in mind, Japan has primarily focused on supporting Afghanistan's infrastructure development. In the past, Japan made



significant contributions in this area, and in the last three years, it has not neglected these efforts either. Over the last three years, Japan has provided substantial support in various sectors, including education, health, women's empowerment, and agriculture. For instance, Japan contributed \$25 million to the construction and renovation of 165 schools, \$13 million to the health sector, \$10 million to enhancing women's economic activities, \$14 million to the agricultural sector, and an additional \$10 million to support alternative livelihoods for opium poppy cultivation. These are just a few examples of the numerous initiatives Japan has undertaken in Afghanistan over the past three years.

It is also worth mentioning the development work of a Japanese humanitarian named Nakamura (nicknamed "Kaka Murad"), who was tragically assassinated by unknown armed individuals in eastern Afghanistan during the previous regime. Although Japan has contributed significantly to infrastructure projects, these efforts appear to be relatively limited compared to those made during the Republic era. During the Republic, Japan provided approximately \$300 million in aid annually, with the majority directed towards infrastructure projects. However, under the Islamic Emirate, Japan's annual contributions have been slightly over \$150 million, representing roughly half of the previous amounts. This reduction in aid is primarily due to two factors: First, the worsening humanitarian situation in Afghanistan prompted Japan to prioritize addressing immediate needs. Second, after the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate, Japan suspended all its infrastructure projects in the country.

4. Mobilizing Global Support for Afghanistan

In addition to its direct assistance, Japan has continuously strived to garner international support and attention for Afghanistan. This approach has become even more prominent following the establishment of the Islamic Emirate. Japan, leveraging its influence in global forums and based on an economically driven perspective towards Afghanistan, aims to once again bring the plight of Afghanistan to the forefront of the global community. The G7 (Group of Seven industrialized nations) is a significant platform where Japan seeks to raise awareness about Afghanistan's critical situation among world powers. Given Japan's political prestige and its esteemed economic status, it is perhaps better positioned than any other nation to serve as a central figure in rallying support for Afghanistan. The actions and approach of Japan towards Afghanistan indicate that its officials are keen on assuming this responsibility.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis conducted, three key factors have driven Japan's sustained focus and support for Afghanistan. Notably, Japan does not pursue political, security, or economic interests in Afghanistan, making it difficult to identify any personal or strategic motives behind its aid and assistance, except for its occasional alignment with the United States. Nonetheless, Japan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan has consistently been positive, supportive, and aimed at encouraging the Afghan government to follow a sound political path.

Over 20 years during the Republic and the three years of the new Islamic Emirate, Japan has made continuous efforts to deliver aid to the people of Afghanistan. Japan's approach reveals that its



assistance has been provided without pursuing specific political, security, or economic goals, remaining steadfast in its policy of non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs, and refraining from supporting any particular faction.

Although Japan's broader global policies often align with those of the United States, the country has made an independent effort to maintain its supportive stance towards Afghanistan. Japan's overarching objective is to improve the lives of the Afghan people and contribute to Afghanistan's economic development, especially at a time when the country needs substantial and unwavering support more than ever before.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Regardless of past challenges, the Islamic Emirate should create an attractive and suitable environment to ensure the effective utilization of Japan's aid.
2. To encourage Japan to further invest in infrastructure, the Islamic Emirate should present comprehensive economic and infrastructural plans to Japan.
3. To better secure Japan's support, the Islamic Emirate should implement internal measures, such as establishing transparent and accountable governance.
4. The Islamic Emirate should urgently work to resume Japan's infrastructural projects in Afghanistan.
5. It is recommended that Japan channel its aid through credible and effective mechanisms, particularly in coordination with the Afghan government, to avoid past mistakes and ensure the efficiency of its assistance.
6. As Japan's philosophy suggests, "rather than giving fish, one should teach how to fish," it is recommended that Japan focus on supporting Afghanistan's infrastructural projects to foster economic growth and move the country towards self-sufficiency.

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