



## Japan seizes the moment by Brad Glosserman

Japan has put itself at the forefront of international relief efforts in the wake of the devastating Dec. 26 earthquake and tsunami. Tokyo is acting both out of concern for the victims and to forward its own political-diplomatic strategy. Japan's reaction has demonstrated the role that Tokyo desires to and can play in its quest for normalcy.

The scale of the Dec. 26 tragedy continues to mount. The death toll is nearing 200,000 and experts warn that the number of casualties could double; as many as 5 million people have been left homeless. The Asian Development Bank warns that 2 million people could be thrown into poverty as a result.

The international response has come under intense scrutiny. Although billions of dollars in aid have been promised, and much already delivered, the speed with which the world took action has been a source of controversy. Attention has also focused on the motives behind those actions. It is perhaps inevitable that governments would be accused of opportunism, even though criticism seems crass in the face of such suffering. It's unlikely that the victims care about why they are getting help and aid.

On Jan. 1, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro pledged \$500 million in financial assistance to the international relief effort (at the time, the largest such pledge; it has since been eclipsed by other offers); half will go to international organizations and the other half will be provided through bilateral aid. Tokyo has called for a public debt moratorium for some affected countries and will help establish a tsunami warning system for Indian Ocean countries that is modeled on the Pacific Ocean system introduced in the 1960s.

Perhaps even more significant has been the unprecedented deployment of Self Defense Forces (SDF) to the affected areas to help. Tokyo has deployed over 1,000 SDF personnel: 220 Ground SDF, 640 Maritime SDF, 100 Air SDF, and 10 joint staff personnel, as well as three ships, one C-130 transport, and five large helicopters. The total deployment could reach 1,700; the previous largest dispatch was 400 SDF forces sent to Turkey to assist that country after a devastating earthquake in 1999.

Japan is attempting to make the best of this tragedy. The government has seized the opportunity to demonstrate that it can play a positive role in the region and beyond. In every statement that Prime Minister Koizumi has made about the disaster, he has explained Japanese actions in the context of "its responsibility as a member of the international community" and its ability to contribute to regional peace and security. He attended the ASEAN emergency meeting in Jakarta this month to underscore the importance Japan attaches to the relief effort and be seen as playing a leading role. Japan joined the U.S., Australia, and India in a core group of nations

(since disbanded) that led the initial relief effort, another sign of its willingness to play a leading role while showing that it is prepared to work with other nations too.

The size of the aid package, the readiness to consider debt relief, and the SDF presence all remind Asian nations that Japan is still a force to be reckoned with in regional affairs. They help correct the view that China is the only real power in Asia and that Japan can only react to Beijing's initiatives. For the first time in a long while, Tokyo appears to have bested Beijing in responding to regional needs and concerns: China has only mustered a reported \$83 million in official aid and another \$18 million in private donations. Several unnamed Japanese government officials have said that the relief effort shows who is "reliable" and a "leader" within the region.

At the same time, the nature of the response demonstrates that Japan's new activism is no threat to regional security. Even though the SDF is leading the way, this military presence is intended to aid the afflicted, not endanger them. The SDF has been on the front lines of the aid effort, and every branch of service has been involved. Military assets once viewed narrowly through the prism of waging war are being used to filter water and airlift supplies. Done properly, it can go a long way toward shaping perceptions of a Japan that is moving toward more military engagement with the region.

This new perception of the SDF is also important for Japanese audiences, many of whom are still uncomfortable with a more visible and active role for their country's military. Unlike the controversial Iraq deployment, this effort is closer to home and is making a very visible contribution to ease human suffering. This fits in nicely with calls in the newly released National Defense Program Guidelines to make international contributions a key component of Japanese defense policy, on a par with defense of the homeland.

Finally, the humanitarian use of the SDF and the call to apply Japan's knowledge and experience in dealing with disasters like tsunamis and earthquakes show how Tokyo can be creative when thinking about international contributions. Japan has distinctive skills and assets it can bring to bear on international problems. Tokyo will find it easier to win public support, at home and abroad, and it will be able to make a more significant contribution when it uses those assets creatively. To its credit, Japan is doing just that in the aftermath of this horrible tragedy.

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