

**Building a Silk Road: U.S.-Japan Cooperation for Afghanistan and Central Asia** by Joseph Ferguson

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This weekend, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton begins her first overseas tour when she travels to China, Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia. To the relief of the Japanese government, she will first touch down in Tokyo, where she is expected to reaffirm the U.S.-Japan alliance as the bedrock of U.S. policy and strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. One aspect of Clinton's trip that has received little attention in the media is the potential for expanded U.S.-Japanese cooperation in Afghanistan. In fact, this issue is likely to be near the top of her agenda in Tokyo. If the Japanese government can increase its participation in the campaign in Afghanistan, then it will surely score points with the Obama administration at a time when many in Tokyo are concerned that a Democratic White House will bypass Tokyo for Beijing when it comes to discussion of the crucial strategic issues in Asia.

Over the last few months, there has been much hand-wringing in Tokyo and Washington about Japan's role in the war on terror, particularly concerning operations in Afghanistan. In December, the Japanese Diet passed a bill amending the Antiterrorism Special Measures Law, giving a one-year extension of the Maritime Self-Defense Force's (MSDF) refueling activities in the Indian Ocean. Although this was seen as a victory for conservative and pro-U.S. members of the Japanese political elite, it was a temporary one. The vote was an override of an earlier Upper House rejection, and because the refueling mission is still a year-to-year deal, there is still a cloud over Japan's contributions to the war in Afghanistan. In fact, MSDF refueling missions peaked in 2002 (when 184,400 kiloliters of fuel were delivered) and have since decreased annually (as of November 2008, the total was 10,940 kiloliters for the entire year).

In a recent interview with the *Asahi Shimbun*, outgoing U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian & Pacific Security Affairs James Shinn expressed the disappointment in Washington about Japan's contributions: "Japan's refueling mission in the Indian Ocean is a very limited contribution. It's regrettable that Japan cannot do anything more. Among the Group of Seven (G-7) nations, Japan is the only country that has not sent troops to Afghanistan."

Last summer, the Bush administration asked the Japanese government to deliver \$20 billion for the Afghan campaign over a five-year period. The Pentagon suggested that Japan could do more, such as supplying transport planes and

helicopters, as well as placing Japanese individuals on Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) operating across the country. The Japanese government announced in January that it would dispatch volunteers for Afghani PRTs, but this issue and the larger issue of the war is still a political hot potato in Japan, as was demonstrated by the shooting death last August of a Japanese NGO representative in the eastern province of Nangahar.

Meanwhile, after a flurry of activity in the region during the period 2004-2006, Japan's robust Central Asia initiative seems to have tapered off. In August 2004, then-Japanese Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Noriko initiated a minister-level dialogue with colleagues from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (Turkmenistan participated as an observer) known as "The Central Asia plus Japan dialogue." Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro launched Japan's "Silk Road Diplomacy" in the region in 1997, and between that time and Kawaguchi's visit to the region in 2004 Japanese loans and development assistance programs totaled more than \$2 billion.

Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro became the first Japanese leader to visit the region in August 2006. Much of the media attention has been focused on Japan's desire to access natural resources (oil, gold, and uranium), as well as Japan's attempt to balance against increasing Chinese influence in the region. But an overlooked aspect of Japanese investment and loan projects in the region is Japan's assistance with infrastructure development, particularly airports, roads, and rail-lines. The Japanese government has assisted the government of Tajikistan in building a road into Afghanistan. Afghanistan shares a 2,000-km border with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan has been a particular focus of Japanese development assistance projects, and Japan has helped with airport and railroad construction there. But since Koizumi's visit to the region in 2006, Japan's Central Asia development and infrastructure projects have largely dwindled.

The United States and NATO have been flummoxed in recent months with transportation and logistical problems associated with supplying 50,000 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops, spearheaded by NATO and U.S. CENTCOM. Most essential military goods are flown in by transport planes, but nonmilitary goods have to be trucked in through Pakistan and across the Khyber Pass. The violence in Afghanistan and the inability of the Pakistani government to guarantee the safety of supply convoys have forced NATO and CENTCOM to open new routes through the Caucasus, across the Caspian Sea, and into Afghanistan via the nations of Central Asia. In 2009, at least 20,000 more U.S. troops are to be dispatched to Afghanistan, causing even more strain on supply routes.

But Washington's relations with the transit nations have always been difficult, even more so since the government crackdown on dissenters in Andijan, Uzbekistan in 2005. Underlying all this is the increasing tension in U.S.-Russian relations over the past five years. As the region's *de jure* security guarantor (through the Collective Security Treaty Organization), Moscow's approval is vital for the success of the trans-Central Asian supply corridor. Many observers see Moscow's machinations behind the recent and sudden announcement by the Kyrgyz government forcing the evacuation of the vital U.S. airbase at Manas by the end of this coming summer.

ISAF desperately needs help in Central Asia. This is where Japan could step in. The Japanese government has been looking for ways to support ISAF *and* to become more of a player in Central Asia. By helping the United States and NATO troops with the overland transport corridor, Tokyo could kill two birds with one stone. The Japanese government would have fewer constitutional issues, because the supplies trucked over the northern route into Afghanistan are nonmilitary (primarily food, fuel, and building materials). Furthermore, the Japanese government could offer to help pay for these supplies and the transportation costs, alleviating NATO and the United States of this burden. Japan could also offer to step up its road-building (as well as railroad) and road-maintenance programs in the region to assure that delays are minimized.

One of the main objectives of the "Central Asia plus Japan dialogue" is the promise of "cooperation between Japan and Central Asia with respect to both regional issues and issues having international dimensions." Japanese Prime Minister Aso Taro echoed this sentiment in a speech he gave as foreign minister in June 2006 to colleagues from the five Central Asian nations: "Japan would like to improve access to transport for both goods and people, and in so doing enable the

people of Central Asia to have a broader view of the world..." In the same speech, Aso spoke of the need to construct a road linking Central Asia to the sea via Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tokyo hopes to eventually see the construction of energy pipelines linking Central Asia to the Indian Ocean. Aso also pointed out that Japan accounts for 30 percent of the development assistance that goes into Central Asia by countries that are OECD members.

Japan's desire to link Central Asia and Afghanistan was in evidence in November 2005 when Afghanistan was admitted into the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (C.A.R.E.C.), a grouping organized by the Japan-led Asian Development Bank (ADB). Tokyo was instrumental in getting the five Central Asian nations membership in the ADB prior to the year 2000. Unlike the United States, Japan's image in the region is not generally politically associated. In a poll conducted by Tokyo University across Central Asia in late 2005, Japan ranked consistently high in popularity among the populace of the five countries, and was identified as a "peace-loving" and "non-threatening" nation by a large number of respondents. Japan also maintains very good relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia, the two trans-Caucasus nations that mark the beginning point of the overland supply route.

By helping realize a 21<sup>st</sup> century Eurasian transport corridor (a modern version of the Silk Road), Japan can honor commitments to its ally Washington in the war on terror, and it can revitalize its Central Asian initiative. Regardless of whether the LDP stays in power, or whether the DPJ forms the next cabinet, a re-energized role in Central Asia – helping to fight the war on terror in Afghanistan – fits in well with the vision of policymakers in both parties for an invigorated Japanese diplomatic strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.