

A Northeast Asian Solution for Af-Pak

by Joseph Ferguson and Drew Thompson

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The political and social stability of Afghanistan and Pakistan – though far from hopeless – is nevertheless quite tenuous. Troops from the United States, NATO, and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) partner nations continue to battle terrorist and extreme Taliban elements across Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Pakistani Army is battling the same groups on its own territory and is dealing with a refugee situation bordering on dire. Although the U.S. military is stretched thin, Washington is hopeful that a surge in U.S. troops will stabilize Afghanistan and permit reconstruction to take place. Attempts by the Obama administration to enlist further NATO troop commitments have met with disappointment. Other ISAF partners – such as Australia and New Zealand – have bravely contributed, but they have few resources and these are being stretched thin.

The United States and its ISAF partners might consider looking further east for support in stabilizing not just Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also in helping to alleviate tensions across the broader Central and South Asian region. China, Japan, and South Korea all have strategic interests in this region, and they all share a desire for stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan, due partly to their growing political and economic engagement with other partner countries in Central and South Asia.

While South Korea has contributed troops to ISAF, both China and Japan are reluctant. China is unwilling to join a NATO-led coalition without a clear UN peacekeeping mandate. Worried that the deployment of PLA units in the region might inflame sentiments amongst China's large Muslim population, China is also concerned how Russia and Southeast Asian nations might perceive such a move.

With precious little experience fielding military units outside of UN missions, China's military might have concerns about its logistical capabilities to support such a deployment, and how its troops would compare to well-trained NATO forces with cutting edge equipment, a high degree of interoperability and long-standing habits of cooperation. That said, if China were willing to make a security contribution, some of their concerns might be addressed if civilian armed police units from the People's Armed Police or Public Security Bureau were deployed.

Japan is hesitant to supply troops to ISAF, not only because of constitutional constraints and pacifist constituencies at home, but the experiment of deploying

Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) troops to Iraq demonstrated its impracticality, as the JSDF unit spent most of the time being protected by NATO troops. Japan's refueling missions in the Indian Ocean have tapered off after a peak in 2002, and Tokyo's reluctance to commit to a full-time program is indicated in the inability to make permanent the legislation on such action. Even without putting boots on the ground, however, both China and Japan can contribute in other ways.

China has perhaps the biggest stake in peace and stability in the region. China shares a border with Afghanistan, is a long-time ally of Pakistan, and has invested billions of dollars in the five nations of Central Asia. Supporting the stabilization of Pakistan would be a significant contribution and one squarely in China's interest. A failed state in Pakistan not only raises the specter of loose nukes, but would also complicate the strategic situation between China and India, the world's two most populous, nuclear armed, and acrimonious nations. China could not only increase its development assistance to the Pakistani government, but it could increase its effectiveness through closer cooperation with the United States. U.S.-Sino cooperation in Pakistan could also include intelligence sharing on terrorist groups and joint efforts at combating narcotic trafficking originating in Afghanistan. China successfully aided the government in Myanmar earlier this decade in eradicating a large portion of the poppy cultivation program there. Continued large-scale investments in the infrastructure of the five Central Asian nations by the Chinese government can also contribute to regional economic development and help alleviate supply problems for ISAF troops in Afghanistan.

Japan's contribution to Afghan reconstruction in the form of development assistance stands in stark contrast to China's meager commitment thus far. This spring Tokyo pledged \$2 billion for Kabul, vs. only \$145 million in aid since 2002 from China. Tokyo has also pledged over \$1 billion for the Pakistan government. Japan has dispatched civilian workers to help with provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) operating in Afghanistan. With a wary eye on China, the Japanese government has been looking for ways to support ISAF and become a bigger player in Central Asia.

Tokyo could discover an opportunity to help support the Northern Distribution Network, ISAF's recent attempt to bring more supplies into Afghanistan through overland routes other than in Pakistan. The Japanese government would not have 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. Synergies can potentially be found if Japan sourced cheap, non-lethal materials in China, stimulating its

lagging economic development in western provinces. Japan could also offer to step up its road-building and railroad projects in the region, expanding its regional influence and contributing to not only the supply of ISAF forces, but also the expansion of a transport and communications network in Central Asia that would spur economic development and encourage social stability.

As mentioned, South Korea has already contributed troops to the ISAF effort, but they were withdrawn in 2007. There are indications that Seoul has not ruled out the dispatch of more troops in the future. Like China and Japan, South Korea has considerable political and commercial interests in Central Asia and therefore shares the common interest for stability. Over the last decade South Korea has bolstered its relations with the nations of Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where there was once a sizeable Korean diaspora. South Korean energy firms are active in the region, including a consortium of Korean firms that operates in one of Kazakhstan's Caspian fields. South Korea has contributed to building the infrastructure needed to supply ISAF troops, a network that will be critical to long-term stabilization and development of Afghanistan. Hanjin – the parent company for Korean Airlines – has recently negotiated a commercial air cargo deal with the Uzbek government, and has developed an air cargo hub at the airport in Navoi in central Uzbekistan. ISAF has already shipped non-military goods destined for Afghanistan via the Navoi route, although air cargo is expensive and inadequate for long-term needs. The Korean government could demonstrate its commitment by subsidizing these flights, and further help the effort in Afghanistan.

Little mentioned is Mongolia, the fourth Northeast Asian nation that has an interest in Afghanistan. Mongolia has dispatched a small number of troops for ISAF, and could continue this effort. Land-locked and with limited fiscal resources, there is little expectation that Mongolia's contribution will compare to China, Japan, and South Korea. Mongolia is a motivated partner, however, seeking to improve its strategic ties with Washington. Mongolia could craft a strategy to increase its benefits from deploying troops to the region, particularly by strengthening diplomatic ties and increasing its forces' experience and capabilities through close contact with NATO forces.

The United States is in a difficult position globally, facing animosity from the Muslim world, its moral authority diminished, and its military stretched thin. Cooperation between allies and among coalitions are the only solutions to global challenges such as the reconstruction of Afghanistan and stabilization of Pakistan. Observers may wonder why these nations – particularly China – would want to collaborate or otherwise support the United States in the region. Although the Chinese government may see itself in competition with the U.S. in Central Asia, the two nations' strategic interests do overlap, particularly in Pakistan. Cooperating with the United States in addressing instability in Pakistan and Afghanistan presents China with the opportunity to improve bilateral relations in the international security area, creating balance in a bilateral relationship heavily dependent on economic links. Additionally, contributing to the development of infrastructure in Central Asia, including road and rail networks would pay

dividends in western China which would benefit from new economic opportunities.

Like China, Japan and South Korea also want to see the establishment of such transportation networks that could among other things, bring more energy to world markets. By cooperating in the region, Seoul and Tokyo would also shore up their respective alliance relationships with Washington, which have been sagging of late. The improvement and expansion of transportation networks across Central and South Asia can be viewed as a double-edged sword, as narcotics, terrorist groups, and even communicable diseases would have easier pathways into and out of the region. But the long-term benefits associated with regional development and economic cooperation between the region and Northeast Asia would heavily outweigh any short-term problems.

By cooperating in Afghanistan, the nations of Northeast Asia would satisfy their own strategic interests and significantly improve relations with Washington. Additionally, Beijing, Seoul, and Tokyo could help shed assertions that they are free riders in an international system dominated by the United States. Deepening engagement between these nations and the United States, as well as amongst themselves, creates new opportunities to expand cooperation and partnership efforts in their own region.