



TOKYO AND TALIBAN 2.0: GAUGING JAPAN'S POLITICAL STAKE IN KABUL

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Tokyo's perspective on the Taliban is a critical chapter in Japan's evolving approach to upholding 'peace' and 'security' in its post-war foreign policy thinking. Despite not being an immediate or major security provider in Afghanistan, Tokyo is a significant stakeholder as a major economic actor in the region and the country. Nevertheless, Japan's outlook and stance vis-à-vis Taliban remains invariably dependent upon its national interests, alliance partnership with the US, and its ever-growing strategic rivalry with China. Japan's security policy and regional (if not great) power identity have been, and remain, closely linked to Kabul since the September 11, 2001 attacks. However, growing Chinese interest and Beijing's mercantilist approach to push forward the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Afghanistan continuously challenge Japan's economic stakes in the region. Now, post US withdrawal, Japan's roles as a peace-enabling nation and official developmental assistance provider are poised to merge to build Tokyo's Afghanistan policies under Taliban 2.0. As such, Japan will attempt to maintain autonomy over its own foreign policy and political future in Kabul, while simultaneously consulting with the US, for ideation direction.

Introduction

The Taliban's takeover of Kabul to form a government in Afghanistan after the Biden administration-led United States (US) withdrawal from the country has certainly impacted stability in the region, as well as the regional security calculus for several regional powers. While Japan remains physically untouched by the events in Afghanistan, it is nonetheless an important international actor with a stake in the evolving situation in the region.

Primarily, Japan's interest in Afghanistan and its policy on Afghanistan draws heavily its importance from the country's status as a treaty ally of the US.¹ As a major global power with deep ties to the Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific regions as a whole, Japan holds the power to shape regional and global economic conditions, making its stance on Afghanistan a crucial aspect to understand the contours of the geopolitics of the region.

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Japan is one of the world's largest aid providing nations with a massive Official Development Assistance (ODA) program. It has modest investments in Afghanistan as well and has been a major actor in the country's rehabilitation, rebuilding and reconstruction efforts over the past two decades. Therefore, while Japan may not be a critical security actor in Afghanistan on account of its geographical separation from the country, it is nevertheless a major stakeholder based on its economic interest and strategic connection via the US. This makes it crucial to gain a deeper understanding of Tokyo's stance towards an Afghanistan governed by the Taliban. While Tokyo's equation on Kabul remains based on its own national interests and alliance with the US, Japan's two-decade-long investments in Kabul have built for it an independent sway in the country and its governance. Based on this context, this paper examines Japan's perception of—and plans for—the Taliban and the future of Afghanistan. The paper reviews Japan's past records and stance towards the Taliban and draws inferences on the current and future take on Tokyo's approach towards a Taliban-led Afghanistan.

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Tokyo and Taliban 1.0

Japan's security and foreign politics have traditionally imbibed dual features of transactional leadership and transformational change.² Transformational leadership, which was implemented alone before the Second World War, had led to unproductive results for Tokyo in the post-war period; it somewhat caused Japan's withdrawal from international engagements, ultimately leading to a strong 'checkbook diplomacy'.³ The Yoshida Doctrine⁴—which committed Japan to a military alliance with the US—served Japan well; implemented at a

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time of Cold War tensions and economic upheaval domestically for Japan, the doctrine reduced Japan's military role to a minimum and allowed it to focus more on economic recovery.⁵ While the doctrine and subsequent US alliance allowed Japan to remain broadly unthreatened militarily, it did lead to criticism of its international role in the post-Gulf War period.⁶ Hence, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, moving away from 'checkbook diplomacy' was a determination Japan held to eliminate negative connotations attached to its leadership capabilities and build its power 'identity' in tandem with its economic growth.⁷ With this long-held goal in mind, Japan reoriented its security policy to merge its transactional and transformational approaches amid a recognition that only fiscal diplomacy is not sufficient to secure Japanese national interests and the interests of Japan's allies.⁸

During the 1990s, there was a rethinking of Japan's security policy, and Tokyo offered more focus on the Asia-Pacific. The Indian Ocean had become a prime focus in Japanese foreign policy, and Tokyo started sending its defense personnel while aiming to advance its maritime planning in the region. The passing of the 1992 Peacekeeping Law and the 1999 US-Japan security rules (and even the 2001 Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, covered later in the paper) were significant parts of the progressions that have been implemented in Japan's security outlook. However, the principal trial of Japan's

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new policy came after the September 11 terror attacks; then Prime Minister Koizumi's reaction was a clear deflection from that of previous Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu.⁹ In addition to the fact that Koizumi committed Japan to contribute troops, he also effectively engaged in backing other Asian countries with progressive visits to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that helped set up an Asian fortitude against terrorism and foster a common Asian identity. A high point of Japan's undeniably pro-active outreach to the region was the International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan (ICRAA) held in Tokyo in January 2002. Ultimately, the Japanese government's reaction to the September 11 attacks—and its ensuing Afghanistan strategy—tried to maintain a balance between supporting the US government through military commitments and constitutional limitations vis-à-vis use of force.¹⁰

Such an evolution in Japan's security thinking and foreign policy measures has a strong link with Tokyo's perception of Afghanistan. In fact, Tokyo's connection to Afghanistan formally began in 1931, although official/diplomatic ties remained rather low key over the following decades.¹¹ During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1980)—even as Japan's treaty ally, the US, supported the Afghan Mujahideen—Japan (like the European nations) was reluctant to enter any “Western” coalition or engage in individual action against the Soviet Union in order to prevent the dispute from escalating and leading to a US-Soviet Union direct confrontation in East Asia.¹² Although the Japanese government released official public statements and utilized the United Nations (UN) platform to censure the Soviet invasion, Tokyo was exceedingly cautious in its response given its proximity to the Soviet Union. For instance, while Japan refused to recognize a Soviet-installed government in Afghanistan, withheld economic aid to Afghanistan during the invasion, and even boycotted the Moscow Olympics, it was unwilling to levy economic sanctions, which could disrupt and hurt the Japanese economy or (perhaps more importantly) aggravate the Soviets politically causing instability in Japan's backyard.¹³ In fact, this

was the period when Japan started using the term “international contribution” more frequently to offer aid and donations, citing primarily a security context.¹⁴

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Accordingly, Japan was exceedingly reluctant to share any ties with the Afghan Mujahideen; in fact, Japan reportedly discouraged a Japanese national from training Afghan guerrilla fighters in martial arts against the Soviets, particularly in light of its pacifist post-World War II constitution which limited (as it still does) Tokyo from engaging in military activities.¹⁵ After the Soviet invasion in December 1979, Japan refused to give recognition to any of the warring factions in the country; it shut down its embassy in Afghanistan, and ties were only re-instituted in February 2002—after the September 11 attacks—with the ICRAA summit which Tokyo hosted.¹⁶ Japan's ties with the Taliban when it was in power from 1996 to 2001 were therefore negligible, although the Taliban's Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Abdul Rahman Zahid, and Field Commander of the Northern Alliance Side, Sayed Hussain Anwari, did visit Tokyo in March 2000.¹⁷ These visits indicated that Tokyo's engagement with Taliban 1.0 was more limited to Taliban's overtures towards Japan as an economic actor. On the other hand, Japan, like most of the international actors at the time, did not recognize the then Taliban government (1996-2001) and maintained very low engagement. The very fact that Taliban 1.0 did little to uphold ‘peace’—a catchword that always held enough domestic and international gravity in Japan—was a determining factor as to why Tokyo maintained a low profile.

Tokyo's overture between Peace and Human Security

Tokyo's perception of the Taliban is associated closely with Japan's evolving experience of human security and international aid. The end of Taliban 1.0 (in 2001) corresponded to a critical period in Japanese foreign policy that was witnessing new developments/changes in Tokyo's international outreach, factoring in human security. Speaking at the UN Millennium Summit in New York in 2000, Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori had featured human security as one of the critical objectives of Japanese international strategy.¹⁸ In his speech, Mori outlined that human security was becoming one of the critical "pillars" of Japan's diplomacy, demonstrated by Japan's decision to make an added commitment of about USD 100 million to the Trust Fund for Human Security.¹⁹ Mori additionally communicated Tokyo's support for the foundation of a worldwide commission on human security and called for the development of human-centered drives. Such activism, which encroached upon financial and developmental wellbeing, assisted Japan in assuming a leadership position in the global community in generating international aid for the remaking of Afghanistan after the Taliban system collapsed in 2001.

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Japan was additionally preparing to make a tactical commitment in the Afghan conflict as seen via the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law. Notably,

had Tokyo not recently developed ties with Asian nations and called for joint action on Afghanistan, such activity would primarily have been perceived as proof of hazardous remilitarization of Japan by its neighbors which would have sabotaged the objectives of Japanese cooperation in the Afghan conflict. Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to ASEAN nations in January 2002, and his declaration of the need to take forward the "heart-to-heart" relationship (advocated much in Chinese style), inferred Japan's preparation to build confidence and connect more with regional governance issues.²⁰ Koizumi's speech at the 2003 ASEAN Business and Investment Summit further stressed the need to "act together and advance together" through regional collaboration for mutual prosperity by means of change, regional participation for balance through integrated multilateral endeavors, and regional collaboration for future challenges.²¹ The speech flagged a more confident Japan, and showed a particular change from the prior picture of Tokyo as a passive, inactive adherent of US policies and stands; instead, Tokyo began to show a readiness to assume a positive role in global and territorial undertakings.

Post the signing of the Bonn Agreement in 2001,²² Japan reassessed its support to Afghanistan in 2002 on the one-year anniversary of the beginning of the peace process.²³ In an indication of its continued interest in Afghanistan, Japan announced the Vision for "Consolidation of Peace" concept which had three key pillars: domestic security, humanitarian reconstruction, and the peace process. Via this outlook, Japan supported the "Consolidation of Peace" by providing active support for convening an Emergency Loya Jirga or ELJ (which is a traditional tribal council), and dispatched professionals to prepare for the ELJ. This initiative underlined Japan's new approach for reconstructing media infrastructure, supported the demobilization process of the soldiers and military stationing points, de-mining in the country, reconstructing civilian police points, promoting anti-narcotic campaigns, humanitarian assistance, aiding refugees, and more importantly, implementing programs like the Reconstruction and Employment Afghanistan Program (REAP) as well

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as health and education infrastructure building and engaging in social welfare schemes.

In later years, Koizumi's vision was built further and more expansively by Shinzo Abe especially via 'Proactive contribution to peace'.²⁴ One of Japan's most important diplomatic initiatives, it builds on the policies Japan implemented to deal with the changed world order post 9/11 with Afghanistan once again emerging as a crucial vector. Japan's 2013 National Security Strategy (NSS) identified Tokyo as a "proactive contributor to peace"²⁵ and focused on improving diplomacy by actively engaging with the US. This was re-emphasized by Abe in 2014 wherein he spoke of Japan's commitment to capacity and peace building at the Summit on Strengthening International Peace Operations.²⁶ Japan's 'proactive' peace policy was reflected in its proactive engagement and security policies as a 'peace-loving nation' that seeks to continue being a 'major player' in the international economy while 'coordinating closely' with other states.²⁷ However, this policy has not seen as deep an implementation in Afghanistan; Japan's caution regarding the situation in Afghanistan has greatly impeded direct security involvement via peace-building in the region. Rather, as highlighted, Japan's focus in Afghanistan has remained largely on humanitarian reconstruction efforts and infrastructure building. Even here, Japan's wariness has limited third-country cooperation. For instance, despite showing interest, Japan remained cautious about investing in the Chabahar port in Iran due to the dual stressors of the security situation in Afghanistan and US sanctions on Iran.²⁸ Even under Taliban 2.0, Japan is unlikely to look to make larger direct investments until its own doubts about the legitimacy and governance of the grouping are met.

Japan's identity card and Afghanistan

Back in 2001 itself, Japan was one of the first international powers that showed proclivity for backing words with actions by supporting the 'war on terror' launched by Washington post 9/11. Such maneuvering by Japan in Afghanistan marked a key moment for its own identity as an international actor, building a radical departure from its post-

Second World War 'checkbook' diplomacy and 'pacifist' constitution.²⁹ In this context, Afghanistan provided Japan with not just a key opportunity to reconfigure its political clout but also marked a domestic diplomacy and leadership win for Tokyo by maneuvering its Article 9³⁰ limitations deftly. Then Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi announced that the Self Defense Forces (SDF)—especially the Maritime Self Defense Forces (MSDF)—would be dispatched to provide support to the US³¹ while remaining mindful of domestic policy limitations. He introduced the ingeniously drafted Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Bill to the Japanese Diet on October 5 which was passed on October 29; by November, two Japanese destroyers and a supply ship departed for the Indian Ocean to aid Japan's ally, the US. By such strategic balancing, Japan had proven itself not only an extremely valuable tactical ally to the US but also a country with the characteristics of—and will to act on—being a 'great power' which will not be sidelined.

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In line with its power identity quest as a 'responsible' member of the international community, Japan sanctioned the first round of large-scale ODA for Kabul at the ICRAA worth USD 500 million to be implemented over two and a half years, with a focus on reconstruction efforts.³² Japanese official Ogata Sadako—who served as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, special representative of the Japanese Prime Minister on reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan, and as President of the Japan

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International Cooperation Agency—was a vocal advocate for Afghanistan in Tokyo and instrumental in mobilizing support to Afghanistan.³³ Between early 2002 and March 2007, Japan's total assistance to Afghanistan grew to approximately USD 1.2 billion, which included USD 161 million in humanitarian aid and USD 1.042 billion in reconstruction assistance.³⁴ In supporting good governance to strengthen the peace process, Japan contributed administrative costs (including supporting their constitutional processes and economic structures) of the interim and transitional governments; provided media assistance by bolstering the communication infrastructure; and assisted with the democratic election process in the country. Further, Tokyo was also an instrumental partner in aiding Afghanistan's infrastructure development, especially in critical road rehabilitation projects, including road links between Kabul to Kandahar (and to other major Afghan cities), as well as the construction of a terminal building at the Kabul International Airport. Millions of dollars from Japan's total aid were allocated to strengthening public health and education infrastructure, helping refugees and internally displaced persons, agriculture and rural development (like the USD 10 million Balkh river water resources management project and the USD 21 million National Solidarity Program), as well as various other technical assistance, grassroots human security and historical preservation projects.³⁵

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Apart from such assistance to Afghanistan via international organizations, the Japanese government has also helped fund numerous field-level projects, like on education and drinking water supply, by Japanese non-governmental organizations (NGO). Notably, Japanese doctor and founder of NGO Peshawar-kai

(or Peace Japan Medical Services), Nakamura Tetsu, directed several large-scale immigration projects in Afghanistan.³⁶ In December 2020, Japan announced plans to continue providing assistance to Afghanistan from 2021-2024—amounting to USD 180 million per year³⁷—comparable to its aid for the past four years.

Similarly, on a diplomatic front, Japan's hosting of the ICRAA in 2002 was a significant step that launched its Afghanistan strategy; it marked the re-opening of the Japanese Embassy³⁸—shut down amidst the Soviet invasion—in Kabul and led to the building of Japan's 21st century Afghanistan outlook in line with its economic power and regional power identity.³⁹ On the security front, beyond the aid it gave to the US 'war on terror', Japan played a key role in the creation of the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) program while its MSDF has supported the Maritime Interdiction Operations (MIO) to prevent the flow of arms via the Indian Ocean.⁴⁰ It provided considerable support to the Afghan police force by funding upgradation of police equipment and supporting counter-narcotics program (including capacity building to reduce narcotic demand). Tokyo also invested in mine counter-measures (such as procurement of defining equipment and funding defining activities) as well as research projects to develop new machines.

Such comprehensive and financially significant assistance—beginning in 2002 itself—is a testament to Japan's vested interest in the country. Despite being a non-critical security actor, Japan's contributions to refugee settlement and comprehensive development have made it a crucial actor in the Afghan nation-building process. Overall, Japan's economic abilities in 2001 shaped its outlook towards its own role in Afghanistan; now, defining Tokyo's role in the post-Taliban order will require a similar, if not grander, level of political and economic tact. Officially, the Japanese government has shown preference for an “inclusive government” (like most major powers) by encouraging a “durable and comprehensive peace” mechanism that supported the peace process.⁴¹ However, the rapid advance of the Taliban was a ‘shock’ that dealt a major blow to Tokyo,⁴² and its

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efforts toward rebuilding Afghanistan.

Japan and Taliban 2.0

Today, Japan's identity as a 'great power' is tied with its continued engagement as a capable member of the international community. Tokyo hosting the 2020 Olympics—even amidst rising COVID-19 cases (among other factors)—only showcases its resilience and desire to achieve great power recognition. While Japan's support to Afghanistan was linked directly to the US under *The Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security*, the Tokyo of today has its own financial advantages and interests driving its engagement with Afghanistan. Japan has a vested interest in profiting from enormous reserves of gas, oil, uranium, and other rich minerals accessible in Afghanistan and adjacent Central Asian Republics.⁴³ In accordance with such interest, Japan would have liked to engage more deeply with Afghanistan to build the latter's infrastructure and potentially its entry into technological and digital connectivity. Importantly, Japan's active role as a major player vis-à-vis aid to Afghanistan would spur its moves to pro-actively involve its partner states like India and the US in particular in Afghanistan's future as well, especially as China's grip on Kabul gains strength.

Notably, Tokyo has provided approximately USD 6.8 billion in aid to Afghanistan in the past two decades since 2001 for the reconstruction of infrastructure.⁴⁴ Since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, opinion in the country is that such aid should continue but for such continued aid to transpire, an official recognition of the new Afghan government is necessary.⁴⁵ So far, Japan has held off on recognizing the Taliban as Afghanistan's official new government;⁴⁶ it is likely weighing its options and looking to coordinate its response with the US before making a concrete policy recalibration. Even as Japan's strategic partner India recently held its first official meeting with the Taliban,⁴⁷ the only softening of Japan's stand has been its decision to relocate its embassy to Qatar—wherein the Taliban have an office—from Turkey where Japan's diplomatic office had temporarily moved upon Taliban gaining control of Kabul.⁴⁸ Even though a small gesture, this move to Qatar

from Istanbul could be an indication that Tokyo is, at the very least, willing to engage the Taliban in preliminary talks to judge what its future policy might be in the country and the extent of scope for Japan to engage with a Taliban government in Afghanistan. However, the creation of the Taliban's new 'cabinet' has received only a lukewarm reaction from Tokyo;⁴⁹ the 'cabinet' includes names that are on US sanction lists which is likely to further hamper the recognition of the same as an official political entity by the West and its allies.⁵⁰

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Moreover, Tokyo will need to assess how the Taliban's rise impacts its interests with the Middle East and Gulf nations at large. While ties with Afghanistan pre-9/11 were low key at best, Japan's relationship with the Middle East has evolved on a positive trajectory since the onset of the 20th century, with Tokyo's ever-growing demand for oil—initially due to warfare and introduction of new technologies (like automobiles), and later due to post-war reconstruction, industrialization and economic growth.⁵¹ The Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OAPEC) 1973 oil embargo only pushed Japan to strengthen its ties with the Middle East and become a strong promoter of peace and security in the region in the interest of its energy security to “safeguard a stable supply of oil”.⁵² In fact, Japan's aid to the region and contributions to 'soft security' were arguably driven by its energy security interests.⁵³ With the Taliban coming to power, one of Tokyo's foremost concerns will be whether the unrest under the Taliban rule will result in a conflict spillover, or possibly even spur further terrorist activities and instability in the region. Within a few weeks, there have already been terrorist activities under the Taliban 2.0 rule and gross human rights

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violations;⁵⁴ the inclusion of questionable names to the Taliban ‘cabinet’ has done little to inspire confidence in Tokyo. In engaging with a Taliban government, Tokyo will be exceedingly cautious and aim to leverage its economic assistance to induce the group to refrain from supporting terrorist activities (within or outside Afghanistan) and govern in a more rational and humane manner. Until now, Japan’s official response to the Taliban’s takeover has been limited to emphasizing its evacuation operation and stating that the international community must continue to collaborate to “urge the Taliban” to address humanitarian issues and take terrorism countermeasures (especially cutting all ties to terrorist organizations).⁵⁵

“(Tokyo’s) Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure [...] remains the only well-placed and well-established non-China backed connectivity venture in Afghanistan.”

The Taliban, for their part, want to maintain ‘good relations’ with Japan especially as Tokyo’s ODA and active presence of non-governmental organizations is crucial to the rebuilding of the country.⁵⁶ If presented strategically, Japan can use incentives it offers via Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (EPQI) which remains the only well-placed and well-established non-China backed connectivity venture in Afghanistan—to recalibrate the Taliban on a need-basis and reorient the group away from their regressive policies into an actual, reformed Taliban 2.0. The Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) led by India-Japan-Australia, the Blue Dot Network (BDN) led by US-Japan-Australia and the recently envisioned Build Back Better World (B3W) of the G-7 can all find entry into Afghanistan via Japan which is a common denominator in the ventures; though a lot will depend upon how America will perceive or engage with a Taliban rule. Even as

Japan recently pledged USD 65 million in aid via international organizations to fight the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan,⁵⁷ Tokyo’s direct diplomatic, political and economic equation with the ‘new’ and ‘modern’ Taliban will be formed in accordance with its international partners.

Tokyo’s Vigilantism on China in Afghanistan

Notably, Japan’s involvement in Afghanistan alongside the US, Europe, and other like-minded countries is drawn, at least in part, on the China factor. Beyond Tokyo’s economic investments and energy security implications in Afghanistan, China’s interests in and outreach to the Taliban is a crucial factor in understanding Japan’s Afghanistan policy. Tokyo is no doubt cognizant of the fact that Beijing is quickly warming up to the Taliban even as it urges the group to refrain from supporting terrorism in any form, particularly when it comes to the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which China considers an enemy group. Beijing has already planned to provide economic support to the Taliban (USD 31 million in emergency aid)⁵⁸ and pledged reconstruction aid in the future in exchange for stability in the region (including China’s Xinjiang province). Further, Beijing is also planning to extend its USD 60-billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to include Afghanistan. China has already indicated that the Taliban is in favor of the BRI’s entry into Afghanistan as a means of achieving growth and development in the country.⁵⁹ The BRI can provide China a pathway to further access (if not exploit) Afghanistan’s mines of rare-earth metals and minerals—worth between one and three trillion according to previous government assessments—that are essential for the production of advanced technologies (including state-of-the-art missile guidance systems).⁶⁰ In other words, China’s outreach to the Taliban gives it a crucial strategic advantage by expanding its sphere of influence and gaining an edge in the tech race. With Japan competing with China geopolitically and geoeconomically, a Taliban-Beijing connection (or nexus) comes as a more worrying development for Japan as much as for

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India and the US. Yet, at the same time, Tokyo could find common ground with Beijing in attempting to pressurize the Taliban to maintain regional stability.

Even as Japan remains wary of China filling the power-vacuum in Kabul post the US withdrawal, it is going to wait to seek clarity on Taliban's regime structure and US policies before refocusing its own outlook.⁶¹ Ultimately, as the domestic economic crisis spurred by the pandemic and Olympics as well as political uncertainty regarding a post-Yoshihide Suga Japan emerges, Tokyo's abilities to take a proactive step in South Asian politics remains guarded and judicious. The structure of the post-Taliban world order is already being formed; Japan must seek to capitalize on opportunities, provide humanitarian aid and look for a balanced 'great power' role via multilateral and bilateral cooperation that protects its own national interests in Afghanistan.⁶² If Japan plans to protect its major investments in Afghanistan, it must revitalize substantive political leadership similar to its outreach in the early days of peace-building in Kabul.⁶³

To conclude, Japan's assistance to Afghanistan has greatly shaped the country over the past two decades.⁶⁴ Concurrently, Kabul has proven to inadvertently become a shaping factor for Tokyo's security policies for the 21st century. The post 9/11 geopolitical order, and the role Japan has built for itself in the same by somewhat breaking away from its post-Second World War identity as a completely US-led pacifist country, has seen Tokyo emerge as a key player seeking to build ties with the Middle East and South Asia on its own terms.⁶⁵ For long, Tokyo has aimed to uphold the image of an "honest coordinator of peace" in the Middle East,⁶⁶ and Afghanistan is a critical component in this assertion. As Japan reconfigures domestic political hurdles, it must focus on ensuring its own needs in Afghanistan are met while it frames its policies vis-à-vis Taliban 2.0. Tokyo now realizes that Taliban 2.0 is here to stay, and it must act and engage judiciously not to lose out on its space (and place) that it has modestly created over the last two decades. As a strong advocate of peace and humanitarian assistance, Tokyo can emerge as one of the key political players in Afghanistan, shaping the future of the region. ■

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