

Japan's involvement in the Sri Lankan peace process

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Over the last six months, Japan has been quietly but insistently pushing to play a significant role in the so-called peace process in Sri Lanka. Tokyo is scheduled to host the next round of talks between Colombo and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in mid-March and a major donor conference on Sri Lanka in June. Its involvement in Sri Lanka is part of a wider agenda to enhance Japan's influence, in particular through its interventions in regional conflicts.

The importance of the Sri Lankan talks to Tokyo is underscored by the appointment last September of top Japanese diplomat Yasushi Akashi to act as a special envoy in the peace process. Akashi is the head of a high-level 16-member Advisory Group on International Cooperation for Peace (AGICP), which reports directly to the chief cabinet secretary, Yasuo Fukuda.

Akashi has made three visits to Sri Lanka since his appointment in September. He met with President Chandrika Kumaratunga and senior political leaders, including Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and Opposition Leader Mahinda Rajapaksa. He has also traveled to Kilinochchi in the LTTE-controlled area of the Wanni to meet with Thamil Chelvan, head of the LTTE's political wing.

A Japanese delegation led by Akashi has been included in the sub-committee on Immediate Humanitarian and Rehabilitation Needs (SIHRN)—a group set up as a part of the peace process. Akashi is due to visit Sri Lanka again in early March to meet LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran and chief negotiator Anton Balasingham.

Adding further weight to Japan's involvement, Foreign Minister Yuriko Kawaguchi visited Sri Lanka in January, met with government leaders and toured the war-devastated northern town of Jaffna. She held further talks with Indian leaders in New Delhi.

Tokyo's relatively low-key intervention in Sri Lanka is part of what Akashi referred to at the Tokyo Press Club in December as "a new phase of Japanese diplomacy". As well as Sri Lanka, Japan has been directly involved in Afghanistan and East Timor, as well as the war-torn regions of Aceh in Indonesia and southern Mindanao in the Philippines.

Aid is a major component of Japan's new diplomacy. Last year Japan offered \$US1.8 billion as part of international assistance to Afghanistan. In December, it hosted a donor conference in Tokyo for Indonesia prior to the signing of a peace agreement between Jakarta and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in January.

On February 13, Akashi announced plans for an aid package of about \$US270 million for reconstruction in northern Sri Lanka. He is also pushing for the dispatch of Japanese civilian police and other specialists to the island.

Behind the façade of conflict resolution and financial aid, Tokyo is seeking to carve out a larger role for Japan within the region. Since he came to office in 2001, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has sought to more aggressively assert Japan's economic and strategic interests. He has in particular pushed to end the constraints on the deployment of the military overseas in Asia and beyond.

Under the so-called pacifist clause of the Japanese constitution, the government is prohibited from using its military except in self-defence. Tokyo has already seized on UN peacekeeping operations as a convenient pretext for stretching the constitutional limits. In the 1990s, Japan dispatched non-combat troops to Cambodia to take part in an international force supervising a UN-sanctioned peace deal. There are currently 700 military engineers and officers stationed in East Timor as part of the UN peacekeeping force

there.

Significantly, Tokyo's AGICP committee recommended last December that the government introduce legislation to allow for the more ready use of Japanese troops in multilateral operations backed by UN resolutions. While its head Akashi dismissed suggestions that such a change would allow Japan to support a UN-sanctioned strike on Iraq, it is clear that he is seeking to extend the role of the military beyond strict peacekeeping—that is, supervision of a formally-agreed ceasefire.

Tokyo's professions of concern for peace in Sri Lanka and elsewhere are also a useful device for overcoming resistance at home and overseas to the deployment of the Japanese military. There are still bitter memories throughout Asia of the suffering inflicted by the Japanese military during World War II and the brutality of its colonial rule in China, Korea, Indonesia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Koizumi's moves to ease the restrictions on the Japanese military are bound up with the concerns in ruling circles over sharpening tensions among the major powers. While it has gone along with the Bush administration's "global war on terrorism" and has cautiously backed a US invasion on Iraq, Tokyo cannot but be alarmed over Washington's ambitions to secure control over major oil reserves in the Middle East and Central Asia.

A former chief editorial writer for *Kyodo News*, Kiezo Nabeshima, highlighted the strategic issues at stake in a comment urging Japan to play a larger role in any US attack on Iraq. "These regions are of vital geopolitical importance to Japan," he wrote. "The nation depends on the Middle East for 80 percent of the oil it consumes. Southeast Asia is a major market for Japanese trade and investment.

"These regions are also vital to Japan in the conduct of its foreign policy. The shipping routes that run from the Middle East to Japan via the Strait of Malacca make up the main artery that supplies the lifeblood of the Japanese economy. The vast region that contains these sea lanes is indispensable to Japan's prosperity"

The Japanese navy is already involved in supporting US and British warships that have been patrolling the Indian Ocean as part of the US efforts to prevent Al Qaeda members fleeing from Afghanistan. Speaking in India in January, Japan's foreign minister Kawaguchi

highlighted the growing naval cooperation between the two countries in securing "maritime traffic in the sea lanes across the Indian Ocean and of the Strait of Malacca deserved increased attention."

Tokyo also appears to have chosen the focus for its peace initiatives carefully to match the same broader strategic interests. An editorial in the *Japan Times* commented at the time of the aid meeting on Aceh: "Aceh province occupies a strategic point... [and that] stability in the region... has a close bearing on Japan's national interests." Aceh lies at the northern tip of the Strait of Malacca, and as the editorial noted, is Japan's largest supplier of natural gas.

An editorial in the *Asahi Shimbun* made a similar point about Sri Lanka. "The small island nation of Sri Lanka is of tremendous strategic importance because it lies in the primary Indian Ocean shipping lanes of big oil tankers. Its relations with Japan have traditionally been friendly," it informed its readers.

At this stage, Japan has made no suggestion that it is seeking closer military cooperation with Sri Lanka. It is clear, however, the island has the potential to serve not only as a base for Tokyo's expanding naval operations in the region but also its economic interests in South Asia.

Japan is already the largest donor to all seven countries in South Asia. It accounts for 45 percent of all foreign aid to Sri Lanka. The region is a growing market for Japanese exports and direct investment is also rising. In 2001-02, Japan sold \$US576 million worth of goods to Pakistan and \$US2.1 billion to India. While still small compared to China, Japanese direct investment in India in 2002 amounted to \$US14.5 billion.

It is the defence of these material interests that are motivating Japan's involvement in the peace process in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.



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