Japan’s Role in UN Peacebuilding Efforts: Prospects for Cooperation with the US

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On April 20, The Stimson Center’s Japan Program hosted three experts on UN peacekeeping operations – Dr. Toshiya Hoshino, Dr. Yuji Uesugi, and Victoria Holt – for a discussion on the evolution of Japan’s engagement in the UN and the opportunities for Japan’s continued cooperation with the US.

Hoshino offered a general picture of Japan’s peacekeeping efforts historically. There are three things Japan has not changed since World War 2: Japan’s pursuit of peace, the US-Japan alliance, and Japan’s UN-centric policy. Yet the international environment has changed significantly, particularly in the allocation of powers: the Soviet Union no longer exists; China is rising while US influence is weakening. The nature of conflict has also changed with non-state actors. Hoshino described how China and Russia, guardians of the key principles of the UN, are more willing to change UN rules. The history issue has also become very prominent recently. As the international order is in such tremendous flux, Hoshino stressed that countries should think about a new international order that is grounded in the reality of 2015 while maintaining the principles of international peace and security. Particularly, the dichotomy of Japan as a defeated country and the US and the Allied powers as victors should be overcome by now.

Hoshino highlighted Japan’s contribution to UN activities, indicating that Japan provided official development assistance for weak states, conflict prevention, peacekeeping, post-conflict peace building, national reconciliation, and democratization. Japan is also actively involved in non-proliferation, anti-terrorism, and humanitarian assistance. r Abe has called for a more positive role for Japan on the international stage under the phrase “proactive contribution to peace based on the principle of international cooperation.” While Japan only intends to engage in normal international activities, China and South Korea often criticize Japan of remilitarization. Therefore, Hoshino noted the importance that Japan improve its relations with both in order to play a positive international role.

Uesugi spoke on Japanese efforts toward human resource development based. He described the origins of Japan’s peace building efforts, which went back to 2002 when the Japanese government asked Yasushi Akashi to serve as the head of an advisory committee: Akashi recommended the government create a training system for human resources so that more Japanese would work in the field of international peacekeeping and peacebuilding. In 2006, then-Foreign Minister Taro Aso underscored the role of civilians in Japan’s policy of proactive contribution to peace. Most recently, Prime Minister Abe stressed the importance of the program and stated that Japan intends to cultivate both quality and quantity of its human resources to contribute to the international community.

This human resource program began in 2007 and has trained 164 Japanese and 138 non-Japanese for the last eight years. Non-Japanese trainees come from East Asia, Central Asia, Middle East and Africa, with thirty participants recruited each year. After training in Hiroshima for six weeks, the Japanese are given the opportunity to work as a UN volunteer in specific missions. Successfully, 85% of former trainees now work in the field of peace building. Though the future of these former participants remain to be seen, Uesugi expressed confidence in the program alumni.

In terms of US cooperation, the program has few linkages with the US, though the program has collaborated with Canada, Sweden and Australia. In MOFA, those working on US issues and those working on UN issues are separated and do not work with each other, even though there should be a nexus formed between these two groups of people. There have been opportunities for Japan to
cooperate with the US in the area of peacebuilding and peacekeeping. One is the G4 initiative, through which the Japanese and the US governments jointly organize senior mission leader trainings. Through this, officials from the military, civilians, and police train together. Japan is also very supportive of the US program African Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership – Japan has contributed by providing engineering equipment in Africa through a trust fund in the UN. Uesugi concluded that Japan is likely to continue to support its human resource program and even expand it further.

Holt noted that the UN is now asked to help wherever crises occur, and the US partnerships with allies such as Japan are crucial in dealing with these crises. Japan has contributed to the UN system financially, as well as deploying civilians and defense forces to missions in the field. She described Japan’s contribution of human resources to UN peacekeeping missions – almost 9,000 people – as significant.

Holt then discussed how Japan could deepen its relations with the US both bilaterally and multilaterally. Japan could contribute holistically to the UN and its key missions, be it providing training and support; sending civilian, police and military; helping civilian peace builders, enablers, and logistics; or overall supporting the UN system, such as by participating in the UN Standby Arrangements system.

On whether Japan is still pushing for the Charter reform, Hoshino explained that Japan, forming a group of four with Germany, India and Brazil, has aimed to push the momentum for the reform this year. Japan faces two challenges: one is that African countries’ position on this issue remains divided and somewhat unrealistic. Another is that countries pushing the reform need to put their arguments in concrete text to be voted on. Whether there will be tangible results remains unknown.

One commentator noted that although Cambodia was considered the poster boy for UN peacekeeping operations, there were many problems with the genocide tribunal and the country does not seem to be in better shape today. He raised questions concerning Japanese taxpayers’ views on the money spent in Cambodia, since Japan played a leading role both in peacekeeping and the tribunal, and about the lessons learned from Cambodia. Uesugi answered that despite the negative developments, he believed the Japanese government helped Cambodia become a player in international peace and security: Cambodia is no longer viewed as a failed state or a threat. Uesugi clarified that Japan wants to play a complementary role by fostering local initiatives, rather than dictating actions, which he considered a more sustainable approach. Hoshino added that the Japanese experience in Cambodia sets a model for Japanese engagement with future conflicts, since it was a case in which Japan used all the available tools – political reconciliation, mediation, peacekeeping mission, and judiciary support – to lead a country in a better direction. Hoshino suggested that if Japan, other countries and UN were not involved, things would be much worse, and moreover it takes patience to see long-term results. Holt shared her view that the lessons from early peacekeeping missions are that missions are multi-dimensional; they do not just involve military or police, but rather civilian security is also integral. Because peacekeeping is a rather new enterprise, they cannot be judged by 100% success; rather, countries must continue to refine and reform tools. One audience member offered on the flip side that the situation might not have been as bad had the outside world not been involved early on in the conflict stage. The peacekeeping operations in Cambodia removed some of the conflict that great power struggles had caused.

On Japan’s claim as a peace-loving country and the US government’s position on Japan joining the UN Security Council, Holt remarked that while she could not comment on the US government’s view on history, Japan has played an important by engaging with the broad concept of peacebuilding. She also stated that the US welcomes a UN Security Council that includes Japan as a permanent member.
One audience member asked whether the US and Japan should establish a special US-Japan cooperation process or rely on existing bureaucracies. Hoshino opined that while Japan is ready to take on more international responsibilities and should become more actively involved in various phases of conflict resolution together with the US, since Japan is not a permanent member of the Security Council, its involvement in the decision-making process of writing the mandate for peacekeeping operations is limited. He suggested that Japan could play a more positive role by participating in Security Council discussions regularly. Uesugi cautioned that in the field, the Japanese government has been pushing for an All-Japan approach that promotes coordination between the SDF, MOFA, and NGOs; donors from other countries are not actively involved in this process. Holt added that officials and scholars from Japan and the US meet frequently to discuss bilateral and international issues.

One individual asked about Japan’s role in human development in Vietnam. Uesugi responded that the Japanese government has been helping Vietnamese come to Japan to learn more about UN peacekeeping operations through visiting training facilities in Japan. The Japanese government has also worked with civil society in ASEAN countries. However, he has not seen an active Vietnamese civil society involvement as most participants came from the government.

To a question on further initiatives for US-Japan cooperation, Holt remarked that it is new for an American president to host an event on peacekeeping. The US government is doing so to encourage the UN to show countries what the gaps are in missions it is facing and develop a more strategic approach to better match capacities to missions. Japan can help this effort. The UN needs countries to contribute to missions that focus on peacekeeping in unstable conditions and peacebuilding that helps emerging governments maintain rule of law and human rights.

The audience member responded that since Japan is not fully involved in the decision-making process of peacekeeping, it may be hard for Japan to contribute. Holt noted that the conversation about the mandate is broader than it seems, not only involving countries that are interested in the operation but also those who are friends of countries participating in peacekeeping missions. It is a more collaborative process than writing a document. Hoshino added that in order to make a reasonable mandate, it is crucial to understand the local situation – the US and Japan are capable of analyzing the situations on the ground and make relevant analysis.