

Summary: Japan, European countries, and the United States have a common interest in boosting United Nations peace operations. Japan has been a prominent supporter of a U.S. initiative to encourage participation in peacekeeping operations, but to date, Tokyo's follow-up has been constructive but limited. For Tokyo and its allies, ensuring that the UN can handle today's ugly crises is an unavoidable task.

## UN Peacekeeping: A Focus for Japanese Cooperation with the United States and Europe?

by Richard Gowan

### Introduction

Japan, European countries, and the United States have a common interest in boosting United Nations peace operations. The Obama administration, always broadly favorable toward the UN, was frustrated that peacekeepers could not prevent South Sudan's collapse in December 2013. While the UN currently deploys a record 100,000 troops and police worldwide, it has struggled in trouble spots from Mali to Syria and often has to rely on under-equipped troops from low-income countries. In September 2014, Vice-President Joe Biden convened a summit on the margins of the UN General Assembly to persuade other countries to provide more and better-equipped peacekeepers.

"We have to meet the peacekeeping challenges today," Biden warned. "We also have to look ahead to what they're going to be tomorrow, and we have to do it together."<sup>1</sup> U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power recently announced that the United States

would repeat this event in September 2015, but with President Obama as chair.<sup>2</sup>

Power has urged European governments, now largely free from the military burden of Afghanistan, to send more personnel on UN missions. Some, such as the Netherlands, have already sent high-quality forces — including advanced helicopters, commando and intelligence experts — to Mali. The U.K. and even perennially cautious Germany have indicated that they could also offer the UN more in future.

This fresh interest in the UN is rooted less in Europe's much-vaunted love of multilateralism but a frank recognition of the threats that the continent faces.<sup>3</sup> Since 2011, European policy-makers have struggled to respond to the proliferation of conflicts across North Africa and the Middle East. Their default option has been to throw

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Biden, "Opening Remarks by the Vice President at the UN Summit on Peacekeeping Operations," September 26, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/26/opening-remarks-vice-president-un-summit-peacekeeping-operations>.

<sup>2</sup> Samantha Power, "U.S. Ambassador to UN Delivers Speech in Brussels," March 9, 2015, <http://useu.usmission.gov/sp-03092015.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Gowan and Nick Witney, "Why Europe Must Stop Outsourcing its Security," European Council on Foreign Relations, December 2014, [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/why\\_europe\\_must\\_stop\\_outsourcing\\_its\\_security326](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/why_europe_must_stop_outsourcing_its_security326).

# Policy Brief

the UN at the problem, supporting the deployment of peacekeepers to Mali and Syria and hoping that the long-running blue helmet missions in Lebanon and on the Golan Heights can help contain the spillover from the Syrian war. The EU and NATO could not credibly deploy significant missions in these cases, so the UN will have to suffice. There is now serious talk of sending blue helmets into Libya as well.

European governments thus have good reasons to back the Obama administration's push to boost UN forces. But why should Japan, located a safe distance from the nightmares of Libya and Syria let alone small wars in the Sahel, invest anything in this process?

## Japan's Interests and Limitations

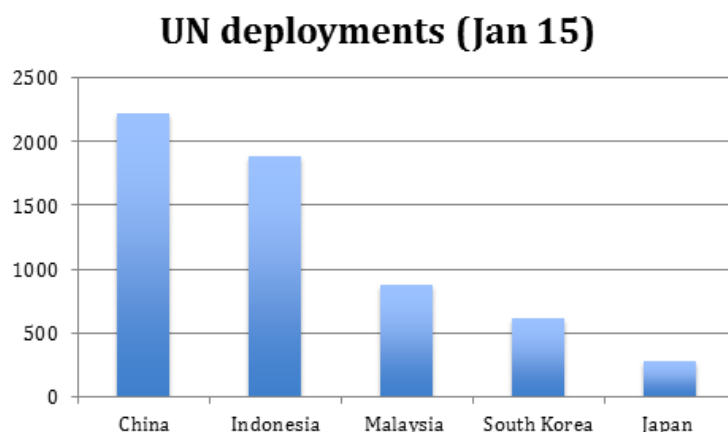
Japan has been a prominent supporter of the U.S. initiative, although for reasons peculiar to itself. Prime Minister Shinzō Abe was one of the co-sponsors of Biden's September 2014 meeting. He promised that Tokyo, which first deployed personnel under UN command in Cambodia in the 1990s and currently has just under 300 engineers in South Sudan, would "participate further proactively in UN peacekeeping operations."<sup>4</sup> This ties in with his agenda of readjusting Japan's attitude to military affairs, as set out in the government's proposed reinterpretation of Japan's pacifist constitution.

Critics may claim that this is just a smokescreen for Tokyo's plans to play a greater military role in Asia. Japan could also use a larger role in UN missions to bolster its claim to a permanent seat on the Security Council, a long-running goal that Abe has reemphasized but China and South Korea dislike profoundly. Not everyone is necessarily pleased with the idea of a more proactive Japanese role at the UN.

To date, Tokyo's follow-up on the "Biden process" has been constructive but limited. Japan is pre-positioning engineering equipment in Africa for future missions on the continent — the UN's main theater of deployments for the last 15 years — and plans to train African militaries to use the new kit. It remains easier for Japan, like the United States and the Europeans, to focus on capacity building rather than taking direct action.

Japan is not among the leading military players in UN operations. It still pays over 11 percent of the organization's

**Table 1**



peacekeeping budget, which now totals over \$8 billion a year. But its direct military contributions have been overshadowed by deployments by some of its neighbors in the Asia-Pacific. China has invested in UN deployments as a means of promoting itself as a globally responsible actor. Indonesia, Malaysia, and South Korea have also boosted their UN forces (see Table 1) but their collective contributions continue to be overshadowed by the South Asian peacekeepers: Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan.

While European troops have also played a limited role in recent UN missions, they are more likely to have encountered Indonesian or Chinese personnel than Japanese. Indonesia is now the leading supplier of UN troops in Lebanon — where France, Italy, and Spain retain significant contingents — while Chinese and Dutch personnel have shared facilities in Mali where they together fended off multiple attacks by Islamist and local fighters.

By contrast, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) have developed a reputation for risk-aversion among other peacekeepers. Under the existing interpretation of the constitution, enshrined in law in 1992, Tokyo only deploys non-combat troops. "That law stipulates five principles for Japan's engagement, including the need for a ceasefire to be in place, consent of the parties to the deployment, maintenance of strict impartiality and the minimal use of weapons," Australian peacekeeping expert Lisa Sharland observes. "The nature of UN peacekeeping has changed

<sup>4</sup> Shinzo Abe, "Strengthening International Peace Operations," September 26, 2014, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000053990.pdf>.

# Policy Brief

significantly since the adoption of that law, yet the caveats on the JSDF's participation haven't."<sup>5</sup>

Japan pulled its personnel from the long-running UN mission on the Golan Heights in 2013 after Islamist rebels kidnapped some of their Filipino counterparts. Austria and Croatia also withdrew their forces. Japan deserves credit for deciding to keep its engineers in South Sudan after the country's implosion in 2013. But the Japanese contingent was already known to be cautious.

In a detailed study of the deployment of the UN mission in South Sudan, Arthur Boutellis and Adam Smith note that Tokyo initially insisted that it should only operate in a 20 kilometer radius of the capital, Juba. While it eventually relented, this caveat meant that the Japanese engineers punched well below their weight.<sup>6</sup>

JSDF personnel serving under other commands in Afghanistan and Iraq have also struggled to adapt to hostile environments, relying on other nations to protect them. It is possible that Abe's proposed reinterpretation of the constitution could change this. Japan could, for example, send guard units to protect its engineers and even endangered civilians. (As a point of comparison, China has recently shifted from deploying solely non-combat troops and police to sending an infantry battalion to South Sudan.) But few observers expect Japanese officers, policymakers, or the public to support a much more robust posture, whatever the legal technicalities.

## Triangular Cooperation

While ambitions for triangular U.S.-European-Japanese cooperation on strengthening UN peace operations should remain realistic, this could still be a fruitful area for collaboration. There is generally no need for Japan, or indeed Europe and the United States, to offer the UN large infantry formations. Instead, as UN officials emphasized in a note to their EU counterparts in 2012, the organization potentially needs:

- Informational and situational awareness;
- Command and control (e.g., forward deployable headquarters);

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Sharland, "Reinterpreting Article 9: Enhancing Japan's Engagement in UN Peace Operations," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, July 2014, <http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/reinterpreting-article-9-enhancing-japans-engagement-in-un-peacekeeping/>.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Boutellis and Adam C. Smith, "Engineering Peace: The Critical Role of Engineers in UN Peacekeeping," International Peace Institute, January 2014, p12, [http://milengcoe.org/news/Documents/ipi\\_e\\_pub\\_engineering\\_peace.pdf](http://milengcoe.org/news/Documents/ipi_e_pub_engineering_peace.pdf)

- Standby and quick reaction forces;
- Logistics and enablers (e.g., helicopters; fixed wing aircraft; engineering; signals; chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) defense; medical and counter-improvised explosive devices);
- High-tech equipment; and
- Trainers and French and Arabic-speaking personnel.<sup>7</sup>

The United States, EU members, and Japan have all these assets to hand. Even if they were all only willing to offer limited individual contributions, they could organize these contributions so as to make a significant collective addition to the UN's capabilities.

To achieve this, Washington, Tokyo, and willing Europeans could form a joint team to liaise with one another and UN officials on force generation issues. These include:

- Developing rosters of potentially available specialized units and personnel, clarifying: 1) their state of readiness for rapid deployments in future crises like Mali; and 2) the security conditions and other factors that would permit them to deploy. This could also help national planners avoid duplicating offers of specialized assets.
- Forging agreements to "mix and match" specialized assets to tackle specific scenarios in future. Japan could, for example, commit to deploy engineers or CBRN specialists in tandem with European force protection units plus U.S. air assets and staff officers to help secure weapons of mass destruction sites as part of a UN operation.
- Working with the less-capable militaries that the UN will still have to rely on in many crises to prepare them for joint operations in future. There are rumors, for example, that African officers have struggled to make the best use of European air and intelligence assets in Mali because they are simply unfamiliar with these tools. Dedicated training programs on how to join together low and high-asset militaries in such scenarios could help remove such frictions in future cases.

Such technocratic forms of planning and cooperation do not always deliver in a crisis. While there are still limits

<sup>7</sup> List based on Adam C. Smith, "European Military Capabilities and UN Peace Operations: Strengthening the Partnership," International Peace Institute & ZIF, October 2014, p3, [http://www.zif-berlin.org/fileadmin/uploads/analyse/dokumente/veroeffentlichungen/ZIF\\_Policy\\_Briefing\\_Adam\\_Smith\\_October\\_2014\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.zif-berlin.org/fileadmin/uploads/analyse/dokumente/veroeffentlichungen/ZIF_Policy_Briefing_Adam_Smith_October_2014_ENG.pdf).

# Policy Brief

to what Japan is likely to offer the UN, U.S. and European planners also remain cautious. Memories of Srebrenica and Somalia still haunt U.S. and NATO officers. They naturally prioritize deterring Russia and fighting the so-called Islamic State over assisting the UN. Despite the Obama administration's enthusiasm for UN operations, only 119 Americans were serving in them at the start of 2015. In Brussels, meanwhile, European states have proven wary of formalizing discussions about specialized assets with the UN through EU-based frameworks. A complex triangular framework involving the United States and Japan could actually bureaucratize and impede future deployment processes rather than facilitate them.

Whatever the best organizational framework for triangular cooperation on peacekeeping may be, some basic points need repetition. The UN is being pushed into an increasingly sensitive and dangerous role in handling crises in the Middle East and North Africa. If the organization does not receive some serious reinforcements, one or more of its missions will eventually crack under the strain — with unpredictable and potentially dangerous implications for Europe in particular. The United States and Europe cannot ignore this challenge. Japan conceivably could do so, but it could harm relations with its Western partners. For Tokyo and its allies, ensuring that the UN can handle today's ugly crises is an unavoidable task.

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## About the Author

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