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JAPAN SHOULD TAKE STEPS FOR STRATEGIC USE OF ODA

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The “strategic use” of Japan’s ODA (Official Development Assistance) has long been advocated, particularly over the past 20 years since the end of the Cold War. There are two ways to interpret the term “strategic use.”

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One interpretation of “strategic use” concerns “what” to be focused, namely the security of the international community or Japan’s national interests. In other words, ODA is more than a vehicle for assisting impoverished countries. Here, the countries and sectors deemed strategically important differ over time. Examples of ODA for the sake of international security include the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, while the examples of ODA for the sake of Japan’s national interests include the cases of Kazakhstan (resource diplomacy), Indonesia and Vietnam (Asian diplomacy), and numerous small/medium African countries (African diplomacy).


The other interpretation of “strategic use” concerns “how” to implement ODA, namely “mobilizing all the resources and tools in one’s possession and combining them organically to respond in a prompt, timely and flexible manner to changes in circumstances.” This is what one often sees in business administration. For the sake of “strategically” utilizing and investing resources at hand, policy decision-making processes and organizational structures need to be tailored to this end.

Careful consideration is necessary to determine which regions/countries should be prioritized and what assistance should be emphasized, in order to achieve strategic objectives. As one good example for such consideration, the Japanese government is contemplating using ODA to provide the Philippines with patrol boats to enhance that country’s coastal security capabilities in the face of growing Chinese political and military influence in the South China Sea. Also, the Japanese government has changed its past policies that avoided assistance in the security field and has used ODA to assist “strategically important sectors” in “strategically important countries,” as seen in the fiscal assistance from 2008 to cover police salary shortfalls in Afghanistan and the provision of ODA in collaboration with Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) from 2009.

At the same time, one should not be oblivious of the importance of “strategic use” in the sense of “how” to implement ODA. Peacebuilding and reconstruction assistance is a case in point, where a deliberate combination of PKOs (peace keeping operations), humanitarian assistance and development

assistance is required in conflict-affected areas. This has convinced the international aid community to attach greater importance to the security-development nexus. In fact, there have been instances in which Japan has simultaneously engaged in PKOs and ODA-funded emergency assistance, as seen in the recovery assistance following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

As PKOs, humanitarian assistance, and development assistance take different approaches organizationally and procedurally, it is essential for relevant departments and agencies responsible for these three activities to share information and collaborate closely, to have meaningful coordination. Given the wide range of organizations involved in the transition from humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding to development, conscious efforts of coordination will be necessary. Furthermore, a more innovative organizational structure would be desirable. Useful examples of such innovative organizational structure that promote cooperation among different departments and agencies can be found in the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (established in the US in 2004) and the Stabilization Unit (established in the UK in 2005).

In Japan, however, changes in the organizational structure for such “strategic” implementation of Japan’s ODA have been nothing more than incremental, confined to changes within the existing ODA framework, and moves toward more systemic ODA reform have stalled in the midst of the political confusion of recent years. Greater efforts must be made to “strategically” utilize Japan’s funds and technology by promoting closer collaboration among a wide range of entities. 

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