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WHAT IS ACHIEVABLE IN AFGHANISTAN? — JAPAN AND EUROPE SHOULD TALK STRAIGHT TO THE US—

Yoko Iwama

We are again at a crossroads requiring us to redefine global foreign policy priorities, just as we were in the years 1947-1950. What are the central and most significant threats to the continuing survival and prosperity of our societies, and what is the right way of dealing with them? In those years, the threat was defined as communism with its political, social, and military power. During those years, a remedy was slowly developed with a strong emphasis on military means. Starting with the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, the United States embarked on an endeavor to halt the

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advancing influence of the Soviet Union. Two incidents in particular were crucial in defining the US response. One was the Berlin blockade of 1948-49, and the other was the Korean War.

I need not go back over the details of the decisions taken in those years; suffice it to say that the Western defense assumed a very strongly militarized character that increasingly relied on nuclear arsenals. The Soviet threat was defined as being military in the first place. The West also needed military means to counter this, but the West was never able to make up the difference in manpower and this gap needed to be overcome somehow. Nuclear weapons were the military answer found in those days. Was it the right answer? We cannot disprove it, but I know that many Europeans and Japanese harbor the feeling that the number of nuclear weapons we came to possess was disproportionate to the danger posed by the Soviet Union, and that it was absurd that we thought it necessary to arm ourselves like that in order to feel 'safe.' The threat of communism outside the areas occupied by the Soviet army at the end of World War II was more political in nature. Stalin was willing to work through the political structure of each country; he did not plan to send his tanks to conquer the whole world.

This is where Afghanistan comes into play. Afghanistan is surrounded by such countries as India, Iran, Pakistan, China and Central Asian countries. This is a ballooning population center and also the supplier of the most extreme terrorists in the world. It also contains many of the resources needed by other countries. Afghanistan has taken on additional symbolic meaning because of the attacks on September 11, 2001. Just like the Americans who felt their security and prosperity depended on the balance of power in Europe in the mid-20th century, so the US today feels that its security in the coming years depends very much on the situation in today's Afghanistan and Pakistan.

It seems that all of us have recently agreed that military means alone are not the solution, and that we also need civilian methods as part of a "comprehensive strategy." Although there has been much talk about a comprehensive strategy, however, the more spectacular part of the Obama strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan thus far has been military surges on both


sides of the frontier. We have also heard about a “regional approach” but we have not seen it materialize.

We need to be clear about the fact that it may not be in our power to win the war in Afghanistan. Although the US is the biggest military power in the world, and therefore its two most important alliances the mightiest in the world, we cannot tip the balance in wars such as those being fought in the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This needs to be done by the peoples in the region themselves. It is their job to define their own ‘nation’ and ‘state.’ The West must have learned this through the experiences of wars with “national liberation fronts.”

ISAF, led by a NATO commander, is a military organization, designed to carry out military operations in the 20th century style of wars between states. However, this is not the case any more. The Taliban and Al Qaeda do not fight wars of the traditional kind. We must rid ourselves of the illusion that it must be possible to mop up every single terrorist in the country if we only try harder. By carrying out extensive military operations and thereby producing collateral damage, ISAF is alienating the local population. Simply by being there, ISAF is made responsible for all the grievances people have against Karzai’s government. It does not help that the ISAF coalition is predominantly Euro-Atlantic; it seems too much like a white-man’s war. We are there in order to contain the danger that some extremist group might get hold of weapons of mass destruction and use them against our population. Hence, we need a long-term strategy aimed at isolating the more extreme fundamentalists and keeping them under constant surveillance. This can only be done when we have local and regional allies in place.

Japanese and Europeans are used to thinking in terms of what is good for maintaining the alliance (i.e., what we can do to please the Americans) but, if we remain too long in an unsustainable operation, then that will in the end harm the alliance itself. We need to talk straight to the Americans about what we think. Many have argued that Afghanistan was a war of necessity whereas Iraq was a war of choice. This is not true. Afghanistan was also a war of choice. Choosing to fight this as a traditional kind of war, the US has made a conscious choice.

Some Europeans had long argued that terrorism has more of a criminal character that needs to be dealt with by the security and intelligence apparatus. Nevertheless, the US chose to fight this in a conventional way and they believed that toppling the Taliban regime would solve all the problems. Thus, the situation is more similar to Iraq than may have been assumed. We need to tell ourselves that we did not define the threat in an appropriate way in September 2001 and that we need to redefine it and think about achievable objectives.

At the same time, we need to think harder about civilian efforts in which we can engage. Europe has been talking about “civilian crisis management” for several years. Japan is the self-appointed champion of the concept of “human security.” Nevertheless, the steps taken in these frameworks have been too piecemeal and not based on strategic thinking. Especially in SSR (Security Sector Reform), much has been tried but we now know this requires more than just sending out policemen and lawyers as “mentors.” We need to reexamine our experiences, admit shortcomings and try to make our contributions more cost-effective. Here, Japan and Europe have an opportunity to share their experiences. We need a more systematic analysis of what types of police or judicial systems the countries in post-conflict reconstruction need most. We also need to work in concert in talking the regional powers into cooperating for the sake of the region’s stability. At the moment, we cannot even send supplies safely through to Kabul. We need to restate our priorities and learn to combine our efforts. 

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