Japan’s Role in Iraq Reconstruction:
Major UN Role Could Allow Japan to Help Ease the U.S. Financial Burden in Post-war Iraq

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On April 17, 2003, European Union leaders issued a joint statement calling for a “central role” for the United Nations in the future of Iraq. How great a role the United States will ask the UN to play in the reconstruction of Iraq, however, remains unclear at present. Much attention is focused therefore on the division of opinion between the United States on the one hand and the Europeans, including Great Britain, on the other, not to mention the concerns of Arab nations.

Thus far, one major player has received little attention in the discussion: Japan. If the United States really hopes to reduce its financial burden and wants Japan’s financial support, an additional UN resolution would help a great deal.

Prime Minister Koizumi, a good friend of President Bush, has been a stalwart supporter of the war against Saddam Hussein, even though public opinion polls conveyed that 60 percent of the Japanese public strongly opposed the war, and has promised to support the reconstruction effort. As the second-largest economy in the world and one of the closest U.S. allies in Asia, Japan’s role is crucial in financing postwar activities. In the Persian Gulf War, Japan contributed $13 billion in cash—almost 16 percent of the total war cost. In early 2002, Japan convened an Afghanistan reconstruction conference in Tokyo and played a leading role in raising funds for Afghan relief, providing $900 million—10 percent of the total.

In addition, Japan’s public sector is a major creditor of Iraq. Iraq owes Japan’s public sector approximately $3.9 billion, which the Japanese government is reluctant to give up in spite of U.S. intentions to reduce the Iraqi debt burden.

In a telephone conversation on April 16, Bush sought from Koizumi a contribution to Iraq’s reconstruction and expressed appreciation for Japan’s $100-million contribution for humanitarian aid. Although Koizumi replied that Japan would play a positive role, he requested Bush’s efforts to involve the UN as a major player. In an earlier speech, the prime minister had stated that he hoped to have a new UN resolution for postwar reconstruction as well as the active participation of France and Germany. Koizumi is scheduled to visit Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac in late April to attempt to establish some common ground with the Europeans.

In a meeting with French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin on April 10, Foreign Minister Kawaguchi stressed that a UN resolution is necessary for obtaining the international community’s reconstruction effort in Iraq. De Villepin replied that the priority is dealing with the unstable domestic security situation in Iraq rather than the new UN resolution.

Apparently, Japan is more anxious for a UN role than France is. This state of affairs is due to the domestic political situation in Japan. Although Koizumi is strongly determined to support his friend Bush with major financial and political muscle, he faces serious domestic political opposition without a UN resolution.

First, Koizumi will need a supplemental budget at a time when Japan’s fiscal situation is the worst of the industrial nations (the budget is only 50-percent financed by current income). Japan has already decided to contribute $100 million for humanitarian aid. If Koizumi is contemplating hundreds of million of dollars, this could be accommodated within present authorizations. If, however, Koizumi wishes to contribute billions as Japan did in the Persian Gulf War, he will need a supplementary budget, which requires new Diet legislation.
Second, he would need Diet support for Japan to send Self Defense Force (SDF) personnel to participate in reconstruction. From the perspective of alliance solidarity—and in the face of an unpredictable North Korea—the dispatch of SDF personnel would be desirable. But, because of constitutional restraints, Japan’s participation in peacekeeping operations is limited to secure areas and must be under UN auspices.

Politically, this situation is very difficult. The largest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan, opposed Japan’s support for U.S. action, as it was not backed by a UN resolution. Thus, it may demand a major UN role as a pre-condition for Japan’s participation in any peacekeeping or reconstruction effort.

In addition, Koizumi’s critical coalition partner, the New Komeito, is traditionally pacifist and only reluctantly accepted Koizumi’s strong support for the U.S. position. At the same time, the New Komeito has been a strong supporter of the UN. On March 23, its secretary general stated that sending troops to Iraq had to be based on the UN resolution. Because the New Komeito represents a powerful force in Japanese society, with support of the largest Buddhist organization, Sokagakkai, its views must be taken into account.

In contrast to the United States, where the UN is viewed with considerable skepticism in administration circles, the Japanese have positive expectations for the UN’s role and hope it can be more effective. In fact, strengthening the UN system has been a major pillar of Japanese diplomacy for the past 50 years. Japan’s provision of logistical support for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan was premised on a UN resolution.

Considering Koizumi’s determination to support Bush and strong public support (in the recent Yomiuri poll, 61.2 percent supported both financial aid and the dispatch of personnel), it is likely that Japan will participate in post-war reconstruction, even without a UN resolution. The Diet process could be prolonged, however, resulting in an unfortunate delay in aid delivery or in a smaller allocation because of needed parliamentary compromises. The dispatch of Japanese military forces virtually would be impossible without new legislation, which in turn would be greatly facilitated by a UN resolution.

Koizumi is also concerned about his own re-election as president of the Liberal Democratic Party in September. Although it is still high by almost any measure after two years in office, continued economic stagnation and the unpopularity of the war are causing his poll ratings to slip.

Bush signed a $79-billion supplemental spending bill on April 16. According to estimates given by several institutions, such as the United Nations Development Program, the military occupation and reconstruction of Iraq will cost $30 billion per year. Simple mathematics indicates that the U.S. taxpayer faces a heavy financial burden from this war. Thus, the United States needs partners who are willing to share the burden. Japan is, but a UN-led effort would make things much easier for the U.S. ally across the Pacific. In addition, Japan’s SDF involvement in Iraq would strengthen the U.S.-Japan security system at a time of increased tensions in Northeast Asia.