

POINT OF VIEW / Michael Clarke

# High stakes make Afghanistan vital for NATO

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The large number of countries that are taking part in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or the operations in Iraq are all doing so with different domestic constraints. The 37 countries presently involved in the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan are bound by no less than 72 different national caveats on the use of their forces.

Each country has its own national political constituencies, but in security matters there is no such thing any more as purely national debate. Deeply committed to the peace-keeping and development operation in Afghanistan, the United Kingdom wants the widest possible coalition to back up the efforts in the nation. The number of countries actively involved in Afghanistan matters a lot to Britain.

From London's point of view, Japan's decision to pull out the Maritime Self-Defense Force from its refueling operation in the Indian Ocean is very regrettable. Japan's participa-

tion in other aspects of the mission in Afghanistan, such as humanitarian aspects, if possible, would be welcomed.

The ongoing political argument in Japan over the MSDF refueling activity is difficult to understand for people in other countries.

It's quite difficult to explain the nuances and the inner politics of this debate to the outside world. It doesn't cast Japanese defense politics in a favorable light with the general publics in European countries.

The operation in Iraq has been politically controversial in Britain for a range of reasons, too. But there is the general international consensus that the stakes are different in Afghanistan. If the operation in Afghanistan fails, that ungoverned space, a failed state, will again provide a geographical location for a resurgent al-Qaida, and that would affect all countries.

Japan's refueling mission in the Indian Ocean is a practical contribution and has a real practicality which makes it potentially significant. If

Japan stops supplying oil to vessels of nations supporting the operation in Afghanistan, refuelling could be provided by other coalition partners or by the United States alone. But if Japan's refuelling operation ceases and is not restarted, the whole operation will be the poorer for it and would face greater challenges in achieving its objectives. Such a decision would have a political impact because that would be seen as Japan's questioning of the legitimacy of the operation in Afghanistan.

It is true that the security situation in Afghanistan didn't improve significantly and the operation didn't go very well until quite recently. When the operation started in 2001, the international community was not as committed to Afghanistan as it needed to be.

None of the powers involved de-



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voted enough effort or money to real nation building in the country. But the situation changed in 2005, when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization decided to become heavily involved in Afghanistan. Since then, there has been more success, with NATO keeping the Taliban forces disorganized and fragmented.

It is conceivable that Afghanistan can be a success.

NATO is very open to suggestions from Tokyo as to the sort of collaboration that could be feasible in future. Unless the operation in Afghanistan is perceived as a success, however, NATO will not be a viable international actor. Afghanistan is a make-or-break mission for NATO as an international military actor.

For that reason, the relationship between Japan and NATO is closely bound up with the future of the Afghanistan mission and its continuing legitimacy.

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