

# Japan's Approach to Peace Promotion

Japan's approach to peace promotion bears distinct characteristics, ensuring long-term development to give war-torn societies tangible peace dividends. The work adapts to local contexts, with financial commitment to co-creating social values through dialogue. Combining humanitarian and mediation work in the same spirit can further enhance peace.

By Katrina Abatis

Conflicts are growing ever more complex, with increased internationalization, splintering of conflict parties, new technologies, and multilateral institutions such as the UN in crisis. While worldwide military expenditure is increasing every year, climbing to 2,443 billion USD in 2023, de-escalation through peaceful means is often subsumed to hard security priorities. With new threats, it is timely to also consider varied responses to overcoming conflicts – not only military action, and to reexamine or update the current tools of peace promotion. Turning to less prominent actors in the field of peace promotion such as Japan, can bring innovative ideas and energy to the well-worn discussions over promoting peace.

A growing number of actors now question an assumed set of universal liberal values, such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, enshrined in the setup of multilateral institutions such as the UN. These concepts, increasingly associated with centers of Western influence in peace policy, are tarnished by the perception that Western states are not following through on the norms they purport to follow. The label of “Western” has thus become a reason for distrust among some conflict parties in third party credibility, for example following the Israel-Hamas war. Türkiye and



A woman holds a paper lantern in remembrance of atomic bomb victims on the anniversary of the atomic bombing in Hiroshima on 6 August 2023. *Kyodo / via Reuters*

China have both used this argument to advocate for their own state mediation profiles, setting themselves up as alternative options. States with long histories of peace-driven foreign policies, such as Switzerland and Norway, are interested to learn more and engage with peace actors such as these but tend to overlook the example of Japan. While Tokyo has recently been moving

closer to NATO and has traditionally been a strong defender of the liberal international order, it is a non-Western nation which projects multilateral structures and norms in a unique way.

## Peace Identity

Japan's historical legacy as a military actor in World War II strongly shapes its current

attitudes towards peace. After the war, Japan renounced future military action in its constitution ([Article Nine](#)), and the right to keep military forces for settling international disputes. Since the 1950s, Japanese politicians have repeatedly debated both the terms of Article Nine, for example the use of self-defense forces, as well as the Article's fundamental existence in the face of rising security threats.

Japan's geographical positioning, in the vicinity of frequent North Korean missile launches and with its neighbor, Russia, at war with Ukraine, raises security fears for the Japanese public. The fractious relationship with China juxtaposed with its close relationship to US foreign policy interests creates frequent challenges for Japan's political leaders in navigating geopolitics. Japan spent 50.2 billion USD on military expenditure in 2023, making it the tenth highest spender in the world.

Within the Japanese population there is large domestic support for peace activities, contributing to a sense that peace is part of a national identity. Peacebuilding has been a pillar of Japanese foreign policy since 2003. Due to the horrors of its citizens' suffering in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan has also been a strong advocate in nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation debates and has advocated for peace education around the realities of nuclear war.

Japan has not actively sought third-party roles in mediation and dialogue support but has mainly utilized economic levers for peacebuilding. These are focused on its contributions to UN agencies, as well as Official Development Assistance (ODA). Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), a governmental agency, plays a leading role in administering Japan's ODA related to its peacebuilding activities. For post-conflict countries, Japan's own economic miracle in the post-World War II years provides an inspiring example to emulate. This lends Japan credibility when it promises economic development after fighting has ceased.

This analysis outlines five aspects of current Japanese peace policy: that it has a strong focus on development, works on long-term funding models, is government-centered, uses an indirect approach, and draws on its UN connections. Japan has been involved in peace activities in many conflicts, including Afghanistan, East Timor, Indonesia (province of Aceh), Myanmar, South Sudan, and Sri Lanka. This analysis draws

on two case studies from Cambodia and the Philippines (Mindanao) for concrete examples because they demonstrate Japan's deeper political engagement and thus more comprehensive third-party role.

### Case Studies

The Cambodian case demonstrates the first occasion in which Japan sought a politically active role for peace post-World War II. From the 1970s to the 1990s, conflict in Cambodia led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. The Japanese Cabinet, Prime Minister, and Foreign Minister came to a consensus, and mobilized the Self-Defense Forces and others to assist a peaceful transition. Japan hosted a conference to address military issues and work towards a political settlement. They lobbied at the UN for attendance at the final political agreement in Paris. After a breakdown over Cambodian power-sharing, Japan supported the peace process, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and diplomats at various levels utilized in Japan's efforts. The MoFA worked in close cooperation with the UN Transition Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and with Thailand. In 1997 when the country almost returned to conflict when relations broke down between co-Prime Ministers, Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen, Japan played a significant role in bringing them back to negotiation, laying the ground for the elections that followed. The example of Cambodia illustrates the importance of a state-led response by Japan, and its multilateral cooperation with the UN.

The conflict in Mindanao between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was long-standing and led to the death of over 120,000 people. Due to Japan's close relationship with the Philippines, the Government of the Philippines asked Japan to participate in the peace process in 2005. Japan had already provided funding in the region, which lent it credibility. It was an acceptable actor to the MILF because of its Asian and non-Christian affiliation. Japan accepted a role in the International Monitoring Team to monitor a ceasefire agreement. When fighting broke out again in 2009, Japan steadfastly maintained support and became a member of the International Contact Group (ICG). The ICG included other states and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), providing an innovative model for the coordination of mediation

support activities that assisted the parties in coming to a comprehensive peace agreement in 2014.

### Development-Led Peace

In both examples, Japan pursued a distinctly development-led approach to peace. Tokyo took the lead in coordinating international development assistance to Cambodia when the Cambodia Paris Conference of Peace concluded in 1991. The early 1990s was a peak for Japan in terms of the economic assistance it was able to provide. Japan was then the top provider of ODA worldwide, even exceeding the US. The Japanese pushed development as the main

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agenda item during the 1992 Cambodian meeting in Tokyo, as an incentive for peace, understanding that they could then indirectly address the issues of the peace process and democratic elections. This experience gave Japan more confidence to take on third party roles.

As outlined in the Mindanao case, Japan has traditionally been one of the most generous providers of ODA to states that it works with in post-conflict reconstruction. The Japan-Bangsamoro Initiatives for Reconstruction and Development (J-BIRD) program began in 2006, even before a final peace agreement, as a method of providing tangible peace dividends to communities through development. This method has been a pillar of Japanese peace policy as the Japanese Government has tended to view economic suffering as a root cause of conflict.

Japan was able to combine humanitarian, peace promotion, and development roles in the Mindanao peace process, not only through development funding after a peace agreement had been signed, but in various mediation support roles, acting as a meeting host in Narita (Japan) in 2011, as an observer in the ICG, and through grassroots work in coordination with NGOs. They chose personnel seconded by JICA to the MoFA, ensuring a flow of skills and communication among staff. Japan also maintained a connected headquarters and field presence so that the teamwork benefited the overall process. This demonstrates

the “[triple nexus](#)” approach advocated by the UN, coordinating a holistic approach between humanitarian, peace, and development work.

### The Long Road to Peace

Due to Japan’s development focus in its peace policy, the Japanese Government has tended to put more emphasis on prevention and reconstruction, rather than responding to mediation support’s shorter-term needs. Japan is often involved in peace activities in a post-conflict stage rather than during ongoing conflict, due to the different timescale of development work compared to mediation support.

JICA have a three-year funding cycle, but they encourage second and third phases, so that in total they often provide nine years of funding for peace-related projects. The longer timeframes mean that beneficiaries build more rapport with their Japanese counterparts and have trust in Japanese projects achieving more sustainable outcomes.

### Government-Led Approach

An entry point into peace activities for Japan has historically been at the request of another government. The political landscape in Japan mirrors its peace engagement techniques. Japan has not experienced many changes in government since its post-war days, with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) predominantly in power. The Japanese Government tends to view other governments as being fully representative of that state and thus finds it difficult to engage with non-state actors and military in their peace work. In the case of Mindanao, the Government of the Philippines’ approval of Japan working with the MILF allowed it to work more comprehensively for peace. In Cambodia, Japan was able to engage with all parties because it was unclear which side was the legitimate government. During the peace process in Cambodia, Japan also realized there was a coordinating role of NGOs along with the official level work and a division of the MoFA was set up to leverage this work.

Japan uses the term non-profit organizations (NPOs) over NGOs, based on Japanese tax laws. The term “non-governmental” does not have favorable associations as is the case in the US or UK for example, where staff move between government and NGO positions, understanding the work of both sectors. NPOs are less well funded than is the case in Switzerland, with its strong history of humanitarian and civic

engagement, thus narrowing the scope of Japanese NPOs’ activities and requiring them to work more on a voluntary basis. Since NPOs are not well-funded, they lose knowledge and expertise-sharing, attracting younger staff who then leave when they have developed experience and are seeking a more stable career.

### An Indirect Style

Internal differences in Japan are resolved outside of formal parliamentary fora. For example, a concept known as [根回し](#) or *nemawashi* (translated literally as “going around the roots”) is a process used in Japanese politics, companies, and university faculties to lay the ground for negotiations in an informal way, gathering support and consensus before a process is proposed. This process allows juniors to approach seniors with their ideas without appearing disrespectful – an essential concept in Japanese society. Processes such as these make elements of Japanese mediation or negotiation approaches indirect, which is both an advantage and disadvantage when engaging in conflicts around the world. With a stronger affinity to working collaboratively, as well as a greater emphasis on the value of humility, a quiet approach may be useful in certain situations or when teaming up for distinct roles in mediation support work

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(e.g. a backchannel approach or when approaching foreign officials who once studied in Japan).

Japan has developed its own style of democracy. Wider society perceives those who express their views in a more assertive way as troublemakers. Japan, while adhering to democratic values, tends not to overtly address issues of governance or human rights with other states and shies away from more political mediation work. It is also less ready to take positions on conflicts around the world – Japan’s official statement regarding the Russian reinvasion of Ukraine in 2022 was unprecedented, but also reflects its geographic positioning in this case.

Values, such as democracy and human rights, are implicit, but not imposed in Japan’s development work. For example, Japan’s preference in ODA funding is a re-

### Further Reading

Lam Peng Er, *Japan’s Peace-building Diplomacy in Asia*, (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2009).

Kristian Herbolzheimer/ Emma Leslie, [“Innovation in mediation support: The International Contact Group in Mindanao”](#), Conciliation Resources, 2013.

Karl Gustafsson/ Linus Hagström/ Ulv Hanssen [“Long live Pacifism! Narrative Power and Japan’s Pacifist Model”](#), *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2019), 32:4, pp. 502–520.

Miyoko Taniguchi, [“The Role of Adaptive Peacebuilding in Japan’s Assistance of the Mindanao Peace Process in the Philippines,”](#) in: Cedric de Coning/ Rui Saraiva/ Ako Muto (eds.) *Adaptive Peacebuilding. Twenty-first Century Perspectives on War, Peace, and Human Conflict* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 263–290.

quest-based ODA, where Japan waits for the recipient country to seek support and does not impose its own ideas. Western donor countries have criticized this approach as too passive, but Japan sees it as encouraging self-reliance and local ownership. In its [Diplomatic Blue Book 2024](#), the MoFA stresses the need to listen to people and be led by this in its diplomatic efforts. In community work in conflict-affected countries they are sensitive to avoid words like “democracy” that can sound self-righteous, but instead co-create processes where these values are in play, e.g. in school-building projects where decisions are taken by a group. Instead of “human rights”, Japanese development workers use a term referring to the primacy of life or draw on concepts from the Quran or hadiths as appropriate to the community.

### UN Ties

Historically Japan has been a staunch supporter of the UN, contributing funds and human resources, making use of its multi-lateral mechanisms to build peace. It was the [top resource country contributor](#) to the UN Development Programme in 2023. Japanese personnel, such as Ogata Sadako (head of the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees before becoming head of JICA), have built important careers at the UN, giving them visibility among Japanese politicians and gaining them access to support peace processes, e.g. in Min-

danao. With the UN's reputation increasingly under pressure from a lack of consensus in the Security Council and Japan's shrinking economy, this focus may wane in the future. However, UN principles

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still enjoy a degree of integrity in Japanese society with the Sustainable Development Goals embedded and even used as a business tool to market products in Japan.

### Opportunities and Challenges

Working at an official level at the request of governments can be advantageous in providing a mandate for peace activities. However, a challenge for Japan may be the lack of experience in working with the NGO sector to reach wider sections of the population in conflict-affected societies or to hold a space for minority voices if it remains government-centered. Japan's association with the UN, with its personnel gaining peace experience through the UN system rather than its own diplomatic structures, can both help or hinder its own peace activities depending on Japan's interests and how the institution is perceived in the future.

While geopolitics plays an increasing role in all conflicts, perceptions of impartiality and a genuine intention to assist in resolving the conflict is critical for those engaged in peace work. Many countries see Japan as having less of an agenda compared to the UK, France, or the US, which is increasingly beneficial to their standing for impartiality in mediation activities, although in some cases this is tinged by association with a US military alliance. Japan has built a reputation in areas such as Mindanao and has advantages as an Asian actor, although this is highly dependent on context as China, North Korea, and South Korea still demand accountability for Japan's past military actions.

If there is public and political will for Japan to be more engaged in peace work, for example in mediation support activities, Japan could leverage its constitutional commitment and positioning in the world. Each state that engages in peace activities has a unique position in which to offer their services – China can leverage the value of its big infrastructure projects and Türkiye its humanitarian assistance. Japan can benefit from the trust and reliability built through its history of ODA spending centered on the needs of affected communities.

### Insights from Japan

Japan's long experience of bilateral cooperation through JICA has consistently put a heavy focus on respecting local ownership and using a participatory approach, understanding the context at various levels (local, national, and international). The triple nexus approach coordinated with other states and NGOs in Mindanao demonstrated this. Listening with humility and co-creating processes based on societal needs, rather than projecting self-righteous values can open opportunities for peace work. States with an interest to be involved in peace processes can learn from Japan's commitment to long-term funding, which increases the image of reliability and results in more sustainable outcomes.

For more on perspectives on Mediation and Peace Promotion, see [CSS core theme page](#).

**Katrina Abatis** is a Senior Program Officer in the Mediation Support Team at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zürich. She is the author of "[Inviting the Elephant into the Room: Culturally Oriented Mediation and Peace Practice](#)".

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