

**Japan’s Assistance for Sustainable Peace and Development in the
 Bangsamoro Post-Conflict Reconstruction**
**Bantuan Jepang untuk Perdamaian dan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan di
 Bangsamoro dalam Rekonstruksi Pasca-Konflik**



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ARTICLE INFORMATION	
<p>Keywords Japan; Official Development Assistance (ODA); Sustainable Development and Peace; Bangsamoro; Post-Conflict Reconstruction;</p>	<p>ABSTRACT The Since 2002, Japan has contributed approximately 26 billion pesos for the sustainable peace and development efforts in Mindanao through Official Development Assistance (ODA), which aligns with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Following the peace agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro separatist group, Japan provided an additional USD 13 million for post-conflict reconstruction. This article examines the rationale behind Japan’s foreign aid in the post-conflict reconstruction of Bangsamoro. Employing a qualitative research methodology with a descriptive-analytical approach, this study draws on secondary data from reputable academic journals indexed in Scopus and Sinta, as well as official reports from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Bangsamoro government, and credible news sources. Primary data was obtained through observation and interviews with stakeholders in Bangsamoro during the author’s internship at the Al Qalam Institute, Ateneo de Davao University, a non-governmental organization committed to interfaith harmony and community empowerment for peace and sustainable development. The analysis applies a realist perspective using Hans Morgenthau’s A Political Theory of Foreign Aid as the theoretical framework. The findings suggest that while Japan’s ODA significantly contributes to regional development and stability in Bangsamoro, it simultaneously advances Japan’s geopolitical and economic interests, particularly in countering China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea and its economic dominance in Southeast Asia.</p>
<p>Kata Kunci Jepang; Official Development Assistance (ODA); Pembangunan Berkelanjutan dan Perdamaian; Bangsamoro; Rekonstruksi Pasca-Konflik</p>	<p>ABSTRAK Sejak tahun 2002, Jepang telah memberikan kontribusi sekitar 26 miliar peso untuk mendukung upaya perdamaian dan pembangunan berkelanjutan di Mindanao melalui Bantuan Pembangunan Resmi (Official Development Assistance/ODA), yang sejalan dengan tujuan Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Pasca perjanjian damai antara pemerintah Filipina dan kelompok separatis Moro, Jepang kembali menyalurkan dana tambahan sebesar 13 juta USD untuk rekonstruksi pascakonflik. Artikel ini mengkaji rasionalitas di balik pemberian bantuan luar negeri Jepang dalam rekonstruksi pascakonflik di Bangsamoro. Dengan menggunakan metodologi penelitian kualitatif dan pendekatan deskriptif-analitis, penelitian ini mengacu pada data sekunder dari jurnal akademik bereputasi yang terindeks Scopus dan Sinta, serta laporan resmi dari Kementerian Luar Negeri Jepang, pemerintah Bangsamoro, dan sumber berita terpercaya. Data primer diperoleh melalui observasi dan wawancara dengan para pemangku kepentingan di Bangsamoro selama penulis menjalani magang di Al Qalam Institute, Ateneo de Davao University, sebuah organisasi non-pemerintah yang berkomitmen pada harmoni antaragama dan pemberdayaan masyarakat demi perdamaian dan pembangunan berkelanjutan. Analisis dilakukan dengan menggunakan perspektif realis melalui kerangka teori Hans Morgenthau <i>A Political Theory of Foreign Aid</i>. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun ODA Jepang berkontribusi signifikan terhadap pembangunan dan stabilitas regional di Bangsamoro, pada saat yang sama bantuan tersebut juga mendorong kepentingan geopolitik dan ekonomi Jepang, khususnya dalam menghadapi sikap tegas Tiongkok di Laut Cina Selatan serta dominasi ekonominya di Asia Tenggara.</p>
<p>Article History Send 5thSeptember 2025 Review 29thOctober 2025 Accepted 2th December 2025</p>	<p>Copyright ©2026 Jurnal Aristo (Social, Politic, Humaniora) This is an open access article under the CC-BY-NC-SA license. Akses artikel terbuka dengan model CC-BY-NC-SA sebagai lisensinya.</p>



Introduction

The establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) served as the beginning of a new chapter in the peace process after decades of conflicts of interests, identities, and aspirations between the Philippine government and various Moro rebel groups. However, this region still requires careful navigation in facing the challenges of rebuilding political, social, and economic aspects (Fridayani et al., n.d.). In this context, third-party intervention plays a crucial role crucial to maintaining the sustainability of peace, both through material and immaterial assistance. Among all foreign contributors to the Bangsamoro's post-conflict reconstruction is Japan, a country known for its pacifist foreign policy and commitment to human security. Japan has developed a pacifist identity that often presents itself as a peace-loving nation in the global arena. This image reflects an idealistic spirit that is deeply rooted in the principles laid out in article number 9 of the Japanese Constitution (Iwami, 2016). Over the decades, Japan's pacifist stance has not only shaped its domestic policies but also influenced Japan's foreign policy, which prioritizes diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and development assistance as means of peacebuilding (Dewi, 2017). One manifestation of the peacebuilding mandate was Japan's presence in the Southern Philippines conflict, providing support during and after the peace process. In fact, Japan has contributed to the Mindanao peace and development a total of USD 515 M (PHP 26 B) for more than 100 projects based on the framework of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including infrastructure development, capacity building programs and support for social cohesion initiatives since 2002 through the Official Development Assistance (ODA) in Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) aimed at promoting stability and growth in the Bangsamoro (Embassy of Japan in the Philippines, 2024).

Despite all the contributions of Japan in the Bangsamoro peace process, Japan's involvement in the Mindanao conflict may not solely lie in humanitarian interests, but also includes economic, political, and security considerations in line with its geopolitical objectives in the Southeast Asian region. In the context of international relations, Japan's strategic interests involve its desire to maintain its influence in Southeast Asia and secure economic interests. Peacebuilding has become one of the pillars of Japan's security policy in the post-Cold War affairs. A study from Tadashi Iwami (2018) highlights Japan's evolving role in global peacebuilding, positioning it as a key pillar of the country's post-Cold War security policy. One of the core elements of Japan's peacebuilding strategy is its strong commitment to human security. Another significant aspect of Japan's peacebuilding efforts is its reliance on non-coercive means. Unlike traditional military interventions, Japan

primarily contributes through participation in United Nations-led peacekeeping operations (PKOs) and the provision of Official Development Assistance (ODA). To the extend, (Er, 2008) conducted an examination towards Japan's peace- building foreign policy commitment in the conflict-prone Mindanao. Er argued that if Japan were succeeded in paving the way to the final peace agreement in Mindanao conflict, Peacebuilding could be a promising 'third path' in conducting its international relations that goes beyond traditional interests.

Japan's presence throughout the Southern Philippines conflict has been ongoing since 2001. Previous study conducted by Naoyuki Ochiai (2016) explored how Japan's development support through Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) contributed to the Moro conflict peace process in the span time of 2003-2016. Ochiai, in this article, argued that the Japanese Government's development support process through JICA, has played a significant role in paving the way to the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement of the Bangsamoro (CAB) in 2014 as the final peace agreement between the government of the Philippines and Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

JICA serves as the key implementing agency of Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA), operating under the broader framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to promote peace and development. In fulfilling its mandate, JICA's programs embody the multidimensional nature of sustainable development, which comprises three interrelated components: economic, environmental, and social. Especially in developing countries, economic development must be pursued with careful consideration of its environmental and social impacts. The environmental component ensures that growth does not come at the expense of ecological degradation, while the social component promotes inclusive and equitable human welfare. Through its initiatives, JICA not only facilitates economic progress but also safeguards environmental sustainability and fosters social equity thereby advancing peace in a comprehensive and sustainable manner. JICA primarily handles technical cooperation, concessional loans (ODA loans), and grant aid to support development projects in 190 partner countries and regions (JICA, 2024) Through JICA, Japan advances its foreign policy interests, economic ties, and global influence by providing development assistance. Previous research conducted by Yennie Lindgren (2021) highlighted that Official Development Assistance (ODA) holds significant importance for Japan, not only regarding financial investments and returns but also as a tool of influence and status. It has played a crucial role in restoring and enhancing Japan's reputation after World War II while serving as a means for Tokyo to demonstrate its dedication to international affairs and active involvement in the global aid system. Furthermore, Jian (2015) argued that to Japan, ODA is

a highly effective tool of foreign policy, particularly in the current context, as Japan seeks to strategically position itself amid the ongoing geopolitical shifts in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions. Therefore, Jian also emphasized that one of the geographical aid distributions became a significant concern as in donor countries usually concentrate their aid on nearby regions. Thus, Asia remains the largest direction of Japan's ODA despite the broader expansion of it in the other regions.

Existing literature predominantly examines Japan's role in peacebuilding in Mindanao through humanitarian and developmental lenses which often framing its engagement as a form of soft power diplomacy. Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) is widely recognized as an effective diplomatic tool, particularly in fostering trust and stability in conflict-affected areas. However, most scholarly attention has focused on Japan's contributions to the peace negotiation process, with limited research addressing its role in the post-conflict reconstruction phase in the Bangsamoro region. Specifically, there is a lack of literature on how Japan's peace and development assistance has been operationalized following the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). This gap becomes even more apparent when viewed through the lens of academic databases such as Scopus, where only four documents were found using the keywords "post-conflict," "reconstruction," and "Philippines," indicating a scarcity of research on the broader post-conflict context in the Philippines. Furthermore, when narrowing the search to Japan's involvement, using keyword combinations such as "Japan and Bangsamoro," "Japan and Mindanao," "Japan and Peace," and "Japan and Moro Conflict" only six relevant documents were identified. Furthermore, the analysis is based on Hans Morgenthau's conceptualization of foreign aid within the realist school of international relations served as the theoretical foundation for this research. In his seminal work *A Political Theory of Foreign Aid* (1962), Morgenthau argues that foreign aid is a tool through which states pursue their national interests rather than an act of pure benevolence. He contends that aid is an extension of foreign policy which is used by donor countries to exert influence over recipients, advancing strategic goals, and secure geopolitical advantages. This perspective challenges the notion of aid as a neutral or purely developmental initiative, highlighting the power dynamics inherent in foreign assistance (Morgenthau, 1962).

Morgenthau categorizes foreign aid into six types: (1) Humanitarian Aid, the only type of aid that is nonpolitical, which highlights that assistance provided purely for altruistic and emergency relief purposes, such as disaster response or medical aid. (2) Subsistence Aid, where assistance is given to maintain the stability of fragile states, often preventing their

collapse without necessarily promoting long-term development (maintaining the *status quo*). (3) Military Aid, that is given to bolster a recipient country's defense capabilities, often in alignment with the donor's strategic interests. (4) Bribery, when aid is used to secure political alignment or compliance from the recipient country's leadership. (5) Prestige Aid, which is provided to enhance the donor country's international standing, demonstrating power and influence without necessarily prioritizing the recipient's needs. Ultimately Economic Development Aid, which is intended to support long-term economic growth which may still serve the donor's interests through trade, investment, and political alliances (Morgenthau, 1962) These figures suggest the potential value of further scholarly exploration into this dimension.

Considering the provided context, this paper aims to offer a more critical interpretation on Japan's contribution to peace through Official Development Assistance and to investigate Japan's presence and the intersection of humanitarian goals and strategic interests underlying Japan's involvement in the Bangsamoro post-conflict reconstruction, after the final peace agreement was signed. The core argument of this article is that Japan's peace and development assistance in Bangsamoro, primarily through ODA, reflects both humanitarian commitment and strategic interests. Japan leverages aid, in peacebuilding, and economic diplomacy to promote regional stability, strengthen partnerships, and advance its broader foreign policy in Southeast Asia including the Philippines.

This paper is divided into five parts. The initial section of the paper consists of the introduction and a literature review that highlights the research gap. The second section of the paper details the research methodology used and the theoretical framework applied in the study. Furthermore, the next chapter delineates the peacebuilding development in the Bangsamoro and Japan's engagement in the Bangsamoro post-conflict reconstruction, including the framework of the ODA as the main diplomacy tool. Subsequently, the fourth part offers an analysis that clarifies Japan's motivation and interest using the ODA in the Moro post conflict reconstruction as the case study. Lastly, the ultimate section wraps up the paper and highlights the implications of the findings.

Method

This article This study employs a qualitative research method with a descriptive-analytic approach to examine Japan's peace and development assistance in the Bangsamoro post-conflict reconstruction. The research relies exclusively on documentary data. Data were collected through systematic documentary analysis of secondary sources,

including official government reports from Government of Japan, JICA, and the Bangsamoro Government, policy papers, academic literature from reputable source such as Scopus, and reputable news articles. Documents were selected based on relevance, credibility, and recency. The analysis was conducted using qualitative analysis. The study first identified and described Japan's key initiatives, programs, and policies in Bangsamoro's post-conflict reconstruction. It then applied Morgenthau's Political Theory of Foreign Aid as the analytical framework to classify these initiatives according to his typology and to examine their political, strategic, and developmental implications. To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the findings, the research employed source triangulation across multiple document types and cross-checked information against academic analyses and official publications. Credibility was further enhanced by prioritizing authoritative and peer-reviewed sources. Theoretical validation was ensured through the consistent application of Morgenthau's framework in interpreting Japan's aid instruments and motives.

Results and Discussion

Japan's Peace and Development Assistance in Bangsamoro

Japan's Human Security Foreign Policy

In the post-Cold War era, the concept of security has undergone a significant transformation, moving beyond the traditional state-centric view to encompass the well-being and safety of individuals within the country. Japan demonstrated the security transformation by recognizing that threats to individuals such as poverty, disease, environmental degradation, and violence can be as destabilizing as traditional military threats (Er, n.d.). The concept of this recognition is referred as "human security". No later than March 1995, the 81st Japan Prime Minister, Tomiichi Murayama started to air out the "human-centered social development" in the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen which depicted Japan's early enthusiasm to focus on human security as "an important pillar of Japan's International policy" as in the following years, the 84th Japan Prime Minister, Keizo Obuchi, formally stated in Singapore, May 1998. Subsequently, he also disclosed that Japan has allocated 500 million yen (approximately US\$4.2 million) toward the creation of the 'Human Security Fund' under the United Nations (Honna, 2012). The concept of human security began to appear frequently in Japanese diplomacy, first mentioned in Japan's Diplomatic Blue Book in 1999 in the development policy section and still consistently an element of discussion in there until the latest publication in 2024 which covers the calendar year 2023 (MOFA,

2024). In 2015, the legislation for peace and security was passed by the cabinet as the legislation will enable seamless response to any situations to secure the lives and livelihood of the Japanese people. Therefore, Japan should proactively contribute more to the peace and stability of the international community. Hence, human security is mentioned as an underlying principle of Japan's cooperation with other countries under the policy of "Proactive Contribution to Peace" in facing global challenges and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), by providing capacity-building support and other initiatives (MOFA Japan, 2015). Japan's commitment to human security is manifested in several keyways. First and foremost, it is reflected in the country's Official Development Assistance (ODA) programs. Japan channels a significant portion of its ODA towards projects that address human security concerns in developing countries, especially in geographically proximate countries as geographical aid distributions became a significant concern as in donor countries usually concentrate their aid on nearby regions such as the ASEAN countries, including the Philippines (Araki, 2007). Japan's involvement in the process and after of the peacebuilding effort in the Southern Philippine's conflict illustrates its commitment in promoting human security as a mean in addressing global issue.

Conflict Development of Bangsamoro

The southern Philippines has been marked by a prolonged history of conflict. The Moro people's resistance to the central government's political hegemony is rooted in colonial times due to the conflict of interests, identities, and aspirations between the two parties. Bangsamoro's aspiration for self-determination goes against the Philippine Government's interests in safeguarding the nation's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity, as they were demanding a complete separation from the Philippines. In the late 1960s, a separatist group known as the Moro National Liberation Front, or MNLF, began to promote a "Moro homeland," which sparked the armed conflict. The civilian population was displaced, and many people were killed as the Philippine government used military force in response (Institute of Peace, n.d.). However, peace discussions were hindered by the unwillingness of both parties to concede on their positions. Bangsamoro's claim for political autonomy, socio-economic advancement, and the elimination of discrimination was inadequately addressed by the central government, which diminished their trust in the government's commitment to resolving the conflict peacefully. To put an end to the fighting and deal with the issues, the Philippine government started peace negotiations in 1976, involving foreign intervention.

The deep-rooted mistrust between parties required third-party intervention to push for mediation, break the impasse, and create a neutral environment for negotiations. The first foreign intervention came from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) through Libya's president, Muammar Gaddafi, resulting in the signing of the Tripoli Agreement between MNLF and the Philippine Government (Maksum et al., n.d.) The agreement laid the foundation for future peace negotiations and expanded international involvement, even though it was poorly implemented, which led to the continuation of the conflict and necessitated numerous subsequent efforts in negotiation and conflict resolution.

After decades of negotiation, a significant milestone was reached in 2014 with the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) between the Government of the Philippines and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The peace agreement is composed of two tracks: Political and Normalization track. The political track involves the enactment of Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) or formally known as Republic Act No. 11054 in 2018 which paved the way for the creation of the political entity that is referred as Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) (Bangsamoro Parliament, n.d.), with the objective as “to establish a political entity, provide for its basic structure of government in recognition of the justness and legitimacy of the cause of the Bangsamoro people and the aspirations of Muslim Filipinos and all indigenous Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy of communities in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao to secure their identity and prosperity, allowing for meaningful self-governance within the framework of the Constitution and the national sovereignty as well as territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines.” The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was officially established on March 2, 2019, marking the commence of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority's (BTA) operations which serves as the interim governing body of BARMM (Bangsamoro Parliament, n.d.) The BTA is responsible for legislative and governance functions as it was effective from 2019 to 2022. However, President Duterte postponed the first parliamentary election, thereby, prolonging the region's political transition by an additional three years (PNA, 2021).

Central to this new chapter is the Normalization Track which aims at securing long-term peace by addressing the underlying issues through the disarmament of former combatants, rehabilitation of conflict-affected communities, and the establishment of stable governance structures (South & Joll, 2016). To this end, normalization track serves as the core mechanism for ensuring a smooth transition from armed conflict to a stable and lasting peace as it establishes the foundational conditions for long-term peacebuilding efforts. Both

normalization and political track serve as the implementation framework to reconstruct the conflict-affected environment. After the framework has been established, implementation becomes the work to be done by the parties involved. While the CAB significantly reduced large-scale vertical conflict between the Philippine government and the MILF, the Moro conflict has taken on more horizontal dimensions, particularly in terms of Intra-Moro rivalries such as clan feuds (Rido) and tensions Between the Bangsamoro Government (BTA) and Non-Moro Indigenous Groups (IP Communities) (Taniguchi, 2023).

Japan's Peacebuilding in The Bangsamoro Post Conflict Reconstruction

Post conflict reconstruction broadly refers to restoring security, political justice, human rights, and the economic, social, and civil society structures in conflict-affected environment. Additionally, Herscher conceptualizes the post-conflict environment as reconstruction time and reconstruction space. While reconstruction time is phases that progresses from emergency response to transition and ultimately to physical rebuilding, reconstruction space refers to a setting where external actors carry out interventions involving local communities with the basic assumption that large-scale damage, the need for expertise, and weak local recovery mechanisms often make external assistance essential (Jabareen, 2013).

In the context of the Moro conflict, the key components of reconstruction are outlined in the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). Politically, this includes the transition from the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Meanwhile, the normalization track focuses on restoring security through the decommissioning of ex-combatants, implementing socioeconomic development programs, fostering confidence-building measures to shift from conflict to stability, and ensuring transitional justice and reconciliation in the conflict-affected environment (Bangsamoro Information Office, 2024). the implementation of each track requires a large resource that the Philippine government, as the main budget holder, must provide to. As to developing country like the Philippine, foreign involvement in this post-conflict recovery becomes crucial to maintaining the sustainability of peace, both through material and immaterial assistance. Japan is present through Official Development Assistance at the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and other mechanisms to provide necessity-based assistance on the reconstruction components listed in the CAB.

J-BIRD: An Initiative towards Enduring Peace in Mindanao

Japan has actively contributed to providing assistance in peacekeeping and peace-building efforts in the Southern Philippines since 2002 after Prime Minister Koizumi announced a support package for peace and stability in Mindanao that is more into security-based aid. In the two following years, Japan joined the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) by dispatching 8 advisor experts from JICA to the Social and Economic Development Section of IMT where they conducted assessments to determine necessary aid. As a result, Japan provided support for the construction of elementary schools, wells, clinics, and vocational training center. Japan has also implemented several development cooperation projects in former conflict areas, including Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects under the governance of Japan-Bangsamoro Initiatives for Reconstruction and Development (J-BIRD). As of now, J-BIRD continues to serve as the overarching framework for Japan's ODA in Mindanao (Taniguchi, 2023) J-BIRD upholds Japan's longstanding commitment to peace and development in Mindanao, which began since 2006. Led by the Embassy of Japan and JICA, this initiative seeks to help individuals and communities in conflict-affected areas experience the benefits of peace through Japan's ODA which is guided by the principle of "human security". To foster peace and stability in Mindanao, Japan further strengthened its efforts under J-BIRD, focusing on governance, public service enhancement, community development, and economic growth. Additionally, Japan supported the creation of a society resilient to violent extremism, terrorism, and conflict, including efforts for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Marawi City and its surrounding areas. Through J-BIRD, Japan has provided a total of 13 billion pesos to all over Bangsamoro region by 2018. Since the establishment of BARMM, the fund has been announced to be added for 12 billion pesos towards Bangsamoro (JICA, 2016). The initiatives are implemented based on 3 pillars: support for political transition of BTA, support for normalization process and support for socio-economic development in the conflict-affected area as illustrated in the sample projects below (JICA, 2022):

Sample of 3 Pillar-based Projects

IMPLEMENTED PROJECTS	WORTH
Support for Political Transition of BTA	
Dispatching Advisor to Chief Minister	
Dispatching Advisor on Budget & Development Planning	
Capacity Development Project for Bangsamoro (CDPB)	
JICA Training Courses & Scholarship in Japan	
Support for Normalization Process	
Master Plan on Urban Infrastructure development in Cotabato City	
Technical Vocation Training for Decommissioned Combatants and Its Communities	
Management & Reduction of Private Weapons	PHP 260,000,000
Social Reintegration of Former Female Soldiers	PHP 66,000,000
Promoting Digital Birth Registration	PHP 318,000,000
Support for Socio-Economic Development in the Conflict-Affected Area	
Road Network Development Project	PHP 10,506,000,000
Programme for the Urgent Improvement of Socioeconomic Infrastructure in Bangsamoro Region	PHP 4,410,000,000
Harnessing Agribusiness Opportunities through Robust and Vibrant Entrepreneurship Supportive of Peaceful Transformation (HARVEST)	PHP 11,334,000,000
Improving productivity of smallholder farmers & fishers (with WFP)	PHP 337,000,000
Women's health needs and Gender-based Violence response	PHP 278,000,000
1,000 shelters for IDPs:	PHP 495,000,000
Capacity building of infrastructure project management for MPW (Phase 1&2)	
Programme for the Support for Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of Marawi City and its Surrounding Areas	JYP 2,000,000,000

Source: Embassy of Japan in the Philippines (2024)

JICA's J-BIRD demonstrated the objective of Japanese peacebuilding through integrating development programs for the conflict-affected environment including the government and the people (Nulhusna et al., n.d.) As listed above, several projects under J-BIRD also aim to improve and build infrastructure that can support J-BIRD's efforts in building sustained livelihoods and resilience in conflict-affected communities in socioeconomic aspects for community empowerment for sustainable stability and peace by also empowering women's contribution within the peacebuilding agenda. According to Ochiai, JICA's representative to IMT, by working on socioeconomic development projects, JICA also aims to realize the objective of the Development Cooperation Charter, which is to advance peace, stability, and prosperity globally. Ochiai also mentioned that JICA's peacebuilding assistance aims to support conflict-affected (Azizah et al., 2020) countries and

regions in achieving lasting political stability and resilience to social and physical disruptions. The ultimate goal is to foster nations where conflicts are prevented from arising or reoccurring. To achieve this, a country must not only establish its legitimacy as a state but also develop the capacity to maintain societal stability through mutual support and conflict resolution mechanisms that prioritize social cohesion (Ochiai, 2016). Subsequently, JICA emphasizes a local ownership approach with both a top-bottom strategy that highlights the need for governments that are “more functional, inclusive, and responsive to the voices of their constituents” and a bottom-up strategy that focuses on enhancing the community’s capacities to accomplish “compromise, reconciliation, self-improvement, and conflict resolution.” to demonstrate a commitment to the nation, demonstrate loyalty to the local community, and maintain relationships of trust in the region, JICA must continue to fully provide support possible even when conditions on the ground change during an active support engagement in both approaches (Taniguchi, 2023). In the implementation, J-BIRD has been collaborating with several local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Bangsamoro region to reflect respecting local ownership as one of the operational principles of JICA. One of the key advantages of working with local NGOs is their deep understanding of the Bangsamoro region’s cultural, social, and political dynamics. Local organizations have established relationships with community members which is making it easier to implement development projects that could be culturally sensitive and widely accepted (UNDP, 2022). Local NGOs are well-positioned to mediate between different groups and facilitate dialogue among various stakeholders, including former combatants, government officials, and civil society organizations. One of the notable projects implemented by J-BIRD in collaboration with NGO is Development and Construction of the Bitiala Dialogue and Training Center in Cotabato City (UNDP, 2018). Under the title which also reflects the project’s aim “Strengthening National and Local Resilience to Risks of Violent Extremism in the Philippines”, Japan is in partnership with UNDP, granting this project mainly to Al-Qalam Institute for Islamic Identities and Dialogue in Southeast Asia of Ateneo de Davao University.

This project was launched on 06 August 2018 at Ateneo de Davao University with a total fund of USD \$3,000,000 with the main objective to prevent violent extremism in Southern Philippine through dialogue and capacity building training to, and religious scholars with the tools to resist extremist narratives. The Bitiala Centre is set to become a hub for dialogue and training, specifically catering to the Bangsamoro communities and youth. It will identify and train dialogue facilitators from local civic organizations while also developing and hosting sessions at the center. Beyond its role as a dialogue center, the Bitiala Centre will

function as a School of Living Traditions (SLT), where cultural masters or specialists pass down traditional arts and crafts through informal, oral instruction and hands-on demonstrations. The facility may also accommodate a living master and provide dedicated areas for training. Furthermore, the center seeks to address identity-related challenges, recognizing them as key factors contributing to violent extremism (Al Qalam Institute, n.d.).

Japan's Motivations and Interests in Bangsamoro in The Lens of Political Theory of Foreign Aid

Through its Official Development Assistance (ODA) programs and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Japan has invested heavily in infrastructure, peacebuilding, and socio-economic development in Southern Philippines (JICA, 2023b). However, from the perspective of Hans Morgenthau's Political Theory of Foreign Aid, Japan's assistance to Bangsamoro is not merely humanitarian but serves strategic and political interests. Japan's aid to Bangsamoro is largely focused on economic development and infrastructure projects. Through JICA, Japan has funded roads, bridges, and water supply systems, improving the economic viability of the region as described above. Furthermore, Japan has invested in capacity-building programs that enhance human resource development and job creation in Bangsamoro region (JICA, 2016). Viewed from this theory's perspective, while these initiatives contribute to Bangsamoro's economic recovery, the aid also serve Japan's national interest (Ferrer, 2007). By giving assistance to the stability and economic growth in Mindanao, Japan could ensure a safer investment environment for its businesses since the stability in the region would also reduce the risks of economic disruptions that could affect Japan's economic relations with the Philippines and the broader ASEAN region, as Japan embraces that member states of ASEAN are more important economic partners than ever to Japan in terms of trade and investment (JICA, 2023a). Japan has also affirmed that development issues for the region are becoming increasingly sophisticated and complex which is pointing to enormous development needs in both socioeconomic infrastructure and human resources development. Therefore, Japan is actively giving assistance to development, peace, and stability in Southeast Asia, including the Philippines to help reduce intraregional disparities through JICA as the aid agency of Japan (JICA, 2023a).

Through several J-BIRD socioeconomic empowerment projects, Japan introduces its technology and expertise to BARMM which potentially creating future demand for Japanese products and services. For instance, within the Improving productivity of smallholder farmers & fishers project, the provision of solar-powered ice-making facilities and waste management

equipment showcases Japanese technological solutions for fishing communities in BARM, which could lead to further commercial opportunities as stated by The UNDP Philippines “The Japanese government, through UNDP, provided livelihood and waste management equipment including solar-powered ice-making machines to ensure food security and sustainable income. These technologies not only support BARMM communities but also introduce efficient Japanese systems to new markets”. This mechanism could be recognized as Tech diplomacy, in which Japan leveraging innovation and technical expertise as a soft power tool to foster international cooperation, enhance bilateral ties, and secure long-term economic and geopolitical interests. The success is evident in the fact that, out of Japan’s total export value of \$9.98 billion to the Philippines, approximately 35.8% consisted of technological goods as of 2024 (Trading Economics, 2025). Under this context are economic development and bribery types of aid.

According to Morgenthau, prestige aid is used to enhance a nation’s international standing (Morgenthau, 1962). Japan’s involvement in peacebuilding strengthens its image as a global advocate for peace and stability for strengthening its influence through soft power strategy in Southeast Asia. By positioning itself as a key player in post-conflict recovery, Japan gains diplomatic influence in the region, which can be leveraged in future geopolitical interest. Moreover, Japan is actively promoting its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) policy where Japan aims to confluence the two seas to achieve broader geostrategic impact in the Indian and Pacific oceans (Hosoya, 2019). FOIP was known as the most important feature of Japan’s foreign policy under Abe administration to challenge China’s rising power in this area through Belt and Road Initiative (Borah, 2020). After the Philippines officially became the member of BRI under Duterte’s administration, BRI shows that it has made some progress and jives with the development needs of the Philippines as under Duterte, China became an active partner in the Philippine government’s “Build, Build, Build” program, with proposed projects extending into Mindanao’s underdeveloped regions through Mindanao Power Transmission Projects with total loan of \$950,000,000 and the ongoing Mindanao Railway Project which will connect key cities and towns across the island of Mindanao such as Davao, General Santos, Cagayan de Oro, Iligan, Cotabato, Zamboanga, Butuan, Surigao and Malaybalay with the total of PHP 81.67 billion (Department of Transportation of the Philippines, 2024).

Nevertheless, some scholars, including Rabena (2018) argued that BRI can subtly influence how the Philippines responds to or negotiates in the South China Sea dispute. The Philippines is one of the disputing parties (claimant) in the South China Sea dispute, where

Japan also has an interest in ensuring freedom of navigation and trade security as around 80% of Japan's energy imports and a large portion of its trade pass through the South China Sea, thus, making it a crucial maritime route for Japan given the fact that None of the South China Sea disputes directly include Japan since it has no claims to any territory in the region nor right to an exclusive economic zone (Envall & Wilkins, 2023). Additionally, China's employs the tactics of dismissal of UNCLOS provisions and its ongoing "grey zone" in the South China Sea reflect a deliberate challenge to international law and norms surrounding the peaceful settlement of territorial disputes. These actions signify a shift toward a power-centric regional order which was exemplified by former Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's 2010 remark to ASEAN: "China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact." In response, Japan has been consistently supporting a rules-based international order, particularly in maritime security, using various multilateral platforms to vocalize its stance. Japanese policymakers and strategists increasingly view Chinese assertiveness as a threat not only to regional stability but also to the integrity of global legal norms. In this context, some advocate for more assertive measures, such as Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) (Government of Japan, 2013), to directly counter unilateral Chinese actions.

As the part of its strategy to counter China's unilateral actions in the SCS, Japan actively engaged in regional capacity-building in which aimed at strengthening the resilience of claimant states, most notably the Philippines. The strategy includes support for enhancing maritime law enforcement capabilities to enable countries like the Philippines to more effectively respond to China's grey-zone tactics at sea. However, Japan's approach extends beyond traditional security assistance. In the face of China's broader geo-economic push, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Japan has adopted a denial strategy to curb Beijing's efforts to dominate the region's strategic landscape. Central to this strategy is Japan's promotion of economic connectivity through high-standard infrastructure investment which is offering credible alternatives to China's influence (Envall & Wilkins, 2023). The Philippines holds strategic value in this context to not only due to its geographical proximity to disputed waters, but also as a democratic partner whom Japan shares deepening ties with. Japan's aid to the Philippines, including support for the Bangsamoro post-conflict reconstruction could reflect Japan's objective of strengthening political stability and sustainable development as bulwarks against China's influence. By investing in both hard and soft security dimensions, Japan places the Philippines as a frontline ally in upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

The Japan's involvement in the post-conflict reconstruction of the Bangsamoro region demonstrates the dual nature of foreign aid which is balancing humanitarian objectives with strategic interests. Through its Official Development Assistance (ODA), Japan has played a crucial role in stabilizing this region by supporting infrastructure development, capacity-building programs, and socio-economic recovery initiatives. These efforts have reinforced Japan's long-standing diplomatic ties with the Philippines by fostering peace and development in the Philippine's a historically conflict-ridden area. The findings indicate that Japan's aid to the Bangsamoro region is not solely driven by altruism but also by its geopolitical calculations, particularly in response to China's expanding influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By investing in the Philippines' development and strengthening bilateral relations, Japan seeks to solidify its role as a key regional partner in countering China's presence in Southeast Asia. This aligns with Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision, which aims to promote stability, rule-based order, and economic connectivity among like-minded nations. Moreover, the Philippine is one of the disputing parties in the SCS dispute that Japan also has interest in. Author acknowledges several limitations in this study. The explanation of the data collection process remains limited, which may affect the transparency and rigor of the methodology. The application of Morgenthau's realist theory also centers primarily on Japan's strategic motives, without fully capturing the interplay between humanitarian objectives and political interests. Moreover, the study's focus on Bangsamoro restricts its comparative scope and does not sufficiently reflect local agency or perspectives. For future research, could intend to expand the analysis to other post-conflict settings, incorporate local stakeholder insights, and integrate complementary theoretical frameworks such as constructivism to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Japan's foreign aid dynamics.

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