



The GSDF Will Go to Iraq Without a Blue Helmet

by Yoichiro Sato

Japan's Parliament has passed the Iraq Humanitarian Reconstruction Support Special Measures Law (Iraq Reconstruction Law). The law enables the prime minister to dispatch Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) to Iraq to assist the U.S.-led coalition forces there. Japan has already sent three of its C-130 transport planes to Jordan to fly humanitarian aid from Italy under its peacekeeping operations (PKO) law. GSDF deployment under the new law will likely start in November 2003. Together with Japan's naval and air logistical support for the antiterror coalition against Taliban/al-Qaeda forces, the GSDF dispatch to Iraq will mark a new era of Japanese military activism outside the United Nations PKO framework.

Between the UN and U.S.

The bitter lesson from Japan's much criticized response to the 1991 Gulf War set the bottom line for Japanese action, but Tokyo's reliance on U.S. diplomatic and military support in dealing with the threat of nuclear weapons by North Korea is pushing Japan toward further cooperation with the United States. Japan's interests in the Middle East differ from those of Washington. Japan's dependence on oil from the region, its large creditor status vis-à-vis Iraq, the lack of any role in arms transfers to regional antagonists, its marginal role in the Israel-Palestinian issue, and considerable doubt among the Japanese public about the justification for war against Iraq all provide potential constraints on Japanese actions. However, alliance maintenance prevailed above all these concerns.

While the U.S. administration initially refrained from officially making requests to Japan, informal communication between the Liberal Democratic Party's former Policy Affairs Research Council chairman Kamei Shizuka and U.S. Department of Defense officials highlighted three areas of possible Japanese contributions: diplomatic support for the military action, rear support for the military operation, and postwar reconstruction of Iraq. The dispatch of an Aegis destroyer to the Indian Ocean under the antiterror special measures law (passed in November 2001) was tacitly understood as an indirect contribution to relieve a U.S. Aegis destroyer from Afghanistan operations.

While the United States and United Kingdom sought support for their draft UN resolution to explicitly authorize the use of force against Iraq, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro offered only vague support for the UN process without

referring to military actions. This cautious approach robbed Japan of time to pass new legislation to dispatch SDF in the war against Iraq. Other dispatch options were considered, but dropped: normal patrol activities in international waters under the Self Defense Forces Law were not needed, and maritime logistical support under the Anti-Terror Special Measures Law was ruled out, as alleged links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda could not be substantiated. Instead, Japan promised to aid postwar reconstruction of Iraq. Only after the March 17 Bush ultimatum did Koizumi explicitly support a military attack against Iraq. Then he cited the need to maintain a credible alliance with the United States in the face of the immediate North Korean threat.

The Japanese public has remained skeptical of the war's legitimacy. Nearly a half of the public opposed the war without a new UN resolution. However, polls also indicated that a majority perceived the United States as the most important ally and threats from North Korea as a justification for maintaining a strong alliance. Public opposition to the Iraq war therefore lacked intensity. However, the recent allegations of intelligence failures are giving strength to those opposed to GSDF involvement in Iraq's postwar reconstruction.

PostWar Reconstruction

Japan hoped that the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P-5) would overcome their differences and agree to a UN-mandated postwar PKO. That did not happen as divisions among the P-5 remain deep. The Japanese government could not dispatch GSDF to Iraq under the existing PKO law. Therefore, new legislation became necessary.

The Japanese government also plans to fold the ongoing airlift operations by C-130 transport planes into the new Iraq Reconstruction Law and fly the planes directly into Baghdad. The firing of a surface-to-air missile at a U.S. transport plane at Baghdad International Airport (presumably by Iraqi guerrilla fighters) is likely to call for a review of this plan.

During the Bush-Koizumi summit meeting in May, the U.S. side officially requested 1,000 Japanese ground troops to provide rear support for the effort to restore domestic order in Iraq. While Koizumi worked on the enabling legislation, he emphasized water supply as the main mission of the GSDF, carefully avoiding details of the deployment plan. The task was left to the Basic Plan to be approved later by the Cabinet.

The reported plan of deploying GSDF near Baghdad Airport is a Catch-22, as the United States wants the GSDF to be deployed in the less secure northern region, while the Japanese public now sees even the airport as too dangerous. Delaying the deployment plan to November is based on the anticipated Lower House election in early November.

The lack of details worries some legislators. The law left the definition of "non-combat areas" - to which the GSDF can be deployed - to the government. Most Japanese see all of Iraq as a combat area as guerrilla activities against coalition forces are reported every day. Even some LDP parliamentarians reminded Koizumi of the need to consult the party before sending the GSDF, watering down the law that only requires a Diet approval within 20 days of SDF dispatch. Unlike the Anti-Terror Law, which explicitly barred transporting weapons and ammunition, the Iraq Reconstruction Law left such details to the Basic Plan. The government has been testing and preparing public opinion by arguing that checking every cargo for weapons and ammunition (if banned) would be impractical.

Concentrating decision-making power in the prime minister's office and the Japan Defense Agency through vaguely written legislation, however, did not give them unlimited power to expand SDF activities. The limited Japanese offer indicates that opposition inside and outside the ruling coalition does check moves that are too fast or drastic.

Japanese political leaders have gone the extra distance to cooperate with the United States despite the perceived lack of justification for the Iraq war. Koizumi's skills in bypassing the opposition and persuading the public greatly contributed to the passage of the Iraq Reconstruction Law. However, inflated expectations based on Koizumi's accomplishments will not likely be fulfilled under a different leadership. American dissatisfaction with Japan's proposed contributions has already surfaced in the media. But overt pressure on Japan at a time of increasing international suspicion about the legitimacy of the war is counterproductive and likely to throw Koizumi's baby out with the bath water. Koizumi's declared effort toward a permanent law, which would enable overseas SDF dispatch in a coalition of the willing, with or without UN mandate, will require careful nurturing.

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