



Japan's Contribution To Iraq Construction - "Too Little, Too Late" Revisited? by Yuki Tatsumi

Last month, Japan passed legislation that opened the door to sending the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) for missions in Iraq. In principle, this was a very positive step forward for those who had hoped to see Japan play a greater role in international security affairs.

Since the passage of the legislation, however, the Koizumi cabinet seems to be back-tracking. They had been suggesting that Japan's specific contributions to operations in Iraq might not be determined until November. Now, with the recent terrorist attack against the UN headquarters in Baghdad, the decision may come even later. If Japan remains indecisive in its contribution in Iraq, despite the now-established legal framework, it will not only hurt Japan's national interest, but also could damage its foreign credibility.

There are several possible reasons why Japan has not yet determined where and when it will dispatch SDF personnel in Iraq. Some argue that the security situation in Iraq is not stable enough for Japan to send SDF in a clearly defined "non-combatant area." These critics argue that if the SDF suffers casualties, public opinion in Japan, which has been growing more supportive of the SDF's participation in the United Nations peacekeeping operations and humanitarian disaster relief, could turn against such missions.

Others argue that Japan's domestic political schedule - the Liberal Democratic Party's presidential election in September, followed by the House of Representatives' election later in the fall - has made Prime Minister Koizumi politically risk-averse. Koizumi, they argue, needs to save his political capital for upcoming domestic political battles, and he cannot afford to make any decision that could jeopardize his position.

Although somewhat convincing, these views do not adequately consider Japan's national interest. Burden-sharing as a U.S. ally is only part of the rationale. In fact, sending SDF troops to support the missions in Iraq is not only in Japan's political interests but also its economic interests.

Japan's heavy dependence on the Middle East for its energy resources (approximately 88% today) is a well-established fact. It is in Japan's interest therefore to contribute to stability in the Middle East. How Japan develops its relations with a post-Hussein Iraq, a country with largely uncultivated oil reserves, is critical in its continuous efforts to

diversify energy sources. It is in Japan's interest therefore to participate in shaping the future of Iraq, so that Japan will be able to build its own relationship with a new government in Iraq.

Further, participation in the reconstruction of Iraq is in Japan's political interest. While often criticized as blindly following U.S. policy, Japan in fact has a history of exercising an independent approach in its policy toward the Middle East. Disagreement between the two allies over policy toward Iran is one such example. Having "boots on the ground" (that is, SDF forces in Iraq) helps Japan to make an independent assessment of the Iraqi situation and thus enables Tokyo to formulate Iraq policy without solely relying on information from other countries.

Lastly, it is simply irresponsible of Japan to continue to rely on other countries in protecting its national interests abroad. The war against terrorism and the war against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction are global efforts, and thus every nation in the world has to share some responsibility in countering these threats. Japan cannot continue to escape from sharing its due responsibility by hiding behind an argument that is understood solely in the context of the Japanese polity.

Some may argue that dispatch of the SDF is not the only contribution Japan can make in Iraq. This is a legitimate argument. In fact, it is important for the Japanese government to come up with a comprehensive policy toward Iraq. However, it is also a fact that Koizumi made the dispatch of SDF into a centerpiece of Japan's contribution to Iraq by publicly stating his will to pave the way for their dispatch. Now, he has to follow-up on his words.

Of course, the decision Prime Minister Koizumi and his government make on Japan's contribution to Iraqi reconstruction will come with a certain degree of political risk. But Koizumi should not be afraid of that risk. Instead, he needs to make his decision based on his views on Japan's national interest (not based on a domestic political calendar), and present his case to his fellow politicians as well as the Japanese public.

The 1991 Gulf War was a traumatic experience for Japan. Despite its generous financial contribution to the coalition military operation, Japan was criticized for its checkbook diplomacy, and the international community considered its

postwar dispatch of minesweepers to be "too little, too late." Over a decade later, despite its significant contribution in Operation Enduring Freedom and the ongoing Afghan reconstruction efforts, Japan faces yet another prospect of similar criticism if it fails to make a robust contribution to the reconstruction of Iraq. The onus is now on the Koizumi government whether it can make a difficult decision of sending SDF troops and thereby sharing risks with other nations.

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