



SDF Must Rebuild Iraq, Not Merely Back U.S. Offensive by Yoichi Funabashi

The Japanese government hastily passed a special measures bill to dispatch the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to “non-combat areas” in Iraq. But its plans were upset because of subsequent terrorist attacks. The SDF plans were evasive like a desert mirage to begin with.

It is time for Japan to switch its thinking. First, it needs to alter its policy of dispatching the SDF as an extension of supporting the U.S. offensive in the Iraq war. Instead, the policy should be one that supports Iraqi nation-building under the U.S.-UN cooperative initiative.

Decades-long cooperation among international society is needed to build a solid foundation for a new Iraq. It is a laborious task. Japan can contribute to the effort with its experience of having rebuilt itself from the ruins of World War II.

At the same time, Japan must also provide medium-term, nation-building support over the next several years. This is where the SDF can play a positive role because there is a limit to civilian cooperation when peace has yet to be established.

According to a senior Japanese government official, a high-ranking U.S. government official told him he wanted the SDF to go into Iraq, even if just a short distance. That must be what Washington really wants. But just because the United States is pressing Japan to station troops in Iraq, there is no need for Japan to dispatch ground forces. Sending air forces makes more sense.

Japan should contribute in areas where it is strong. This is an age in which like-minded parties form coalitions to counter threats depending on what they are. Whether members of a coalition can complement each other to consolidate their power is the key to success of such coordinated efforts.

Japan should mobilize its Air Self-Defense Forces to deliver supplies to Iraq. Japan has the capability to commit several C-130 transport planes over the next few years. In addition to carrying medical supplies and water to Iraq for humanitarian relief, Japan should also deliver supplies to U.N. forces as a form of logistic support. SDF air forces could carry supplies from distribution bases in Qatar and other neighboring countries to airports across Iraq.

There are risks, of course. In particular, they need to take caution against Stinger missile attacks by enemy forces. Every possible precaution must be taken to minimize risks. The dispatch of the SDF to Iraq is different from participation in UN peacekeeping operations after the settlement of conflicts. Fighting is expected to continue for some time in Iraq.

However, Japan must not simply say that it cannot send the SDF because it's too dangerous. Doing so would deny the SDF's *raison d'être*.

If the government decides to dispatch the SDF, it should clarify the purpose of the dispatch and explain it to the people and members of the SDF. This is what was most lacking in the Diet deliberations to pass the Iraq special measures bill.

The logic to support the United States because the U.S.-led Iraqi war was just no longer holds. The Japanese people will also not buy the explanation that it is the duty of an ally to clean up the mess left behind by the United States.

Why is Japan preparing to send the SDF? It is to help the Iraqi people come together to rebuild their nation. There is no way we can withdraw halfway after using violence to overthrow the Iraqi regime from the outside. It is a matter of course for the United States to ensure that peace is established in Iraq. Japan, which supported the U.S.-led war, is just as responsible. Only when Japan makes a daily effort in establishing peace and stability in international society, can it build a solid foundation for its own security and expect support from international society in emergencies.

Second, Japan is heavily dependent on the Middle East for oil and gas. Thus, the stability of the region, including Iraq, is indispensable to the security of Japan's energy.

The dispatch is also important for the maintenance of the Japan-U.S. alliance. The United States embarked upon the Iraqi war and war on terror in a fit of anger and fell into a quagmire. To force it to come to its senses and steer it away from unilateralism toward international cooperation, Japan needs to lend support and help weather the crisis by its side. We must also not forget the increasingly important role of the Japan-U.S. alliance in the face of the North Korean nuclear threat.

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