



Can Koizumi Stand the Test? by Yuki Tatsumi

Announcing the decision to dispatch Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) troops to Iraq in December, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro stated, "Japan's will as a nation, as well as its people's spirit are being tested." The kidnapping of three Japanese civilians, which remains unresolved as I write, now represents a "test" that even the prime minister could not have foreseen four months ago. The Japanese government's response to this crisis will be critical, as it will not only set the tone for a response to similar incidents in the future, but will also determine whether Japan can live up to its renewed commitments to international security operations.

So far, the Koizumi government has sustained its resolve and maintained that it will not withdraw the JSDF. With the JSDF lacking either the authority or capability to engage in investigation and rescue operations, the Japanese government has dispatched the National Police Agency's terrorism response team (TRT) and has been working closely with the United States. The government also has pursued a full-scale public relations campaign to appeal to the Iraqi public while quietly but aggressively seeking the cooperation of tribal and religious leaders in Iraq in order to secure a release of the hostages.

Some have begun to hold Koizumi responsible, arguing that the three civilians would not have been kidnapped had the JSDF not been in Samawah. They are mistaken to blame Koizumi for what happened. Such an argument blindly accepts the kidnappers' logic, and overlooks a fundamental point: the kidnappers are the ones responsible for these actions. Furthermore, the kidnapping of Korean missionaries and Chinese engineers has shown that it makes no difference to Iraqi insurgents whether their captives are from a country that visibly supports the U.S.-led efforts in Iraq or not. The truth is that no one is safe in Iraq. What counts is that the Japanese government, under Koizumi's watch, has been responding quickly to resolve the crisis, determined not to compromise what it deems to be Japan's national interest, which is continued participation in Iraqi reconstruction efforts.

In fact, the current hostage crisis challenges the opposition parties in the way they framed the Diet debate over the JSDF dispatch to Iraq. If anything, the crisis proved how last year's Diet debate was hypothetical, unrealistic, and insufficient. The debate over whether to approve the dispatch of JSDF troops to Iraq revolved around questions such as "Is Samawah safe?" "What would JSDF soldiers do if there is an attack on their base?" "Would JSDF soldiers be allowed to shoot if they recognized suspicious activities around their base?" and "Would the JSDF be transporting munitions to coalition forces?" No one questioned the government's response in case the JSDF soldiers were kidnapped. Despite the murder last year of two Japanese diplomats, no one contemplated the

possibility of non-JSDF personnel becoming victims of terrorist acts and the appropriate government response in such an event.

The Japanese government should maintain the current posture. Caving into insurgents' demands does not make the world, let alone Japan, safer – if anything, it will only embolden these groups. The ultimate goal of the terrorists is not to kick the United States out of their region – that does not explain last year's bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad. Rather, their goal is to expel any outside force that interferes with their plans for a terror-ridden, fundamentalist state in Iraq. The recent terrorist incidents in Spain have taught terrorists that they can influence elections in foreign countries. If Japan succumbed to the insurgents' demands, it will only boost their confidence in their influence. It will not only make Japan more vulnerable, as terrorists will regard Japan as an easy target, but also invite further attacks.

Furthermore, if Japan withdraws its JSDF troops in response to the terrorists' threat, it will only show that Japan is not willing to share risks with other countries. Japan is not the only country whose citizens kidnapped in Iraq. In recent days, South Korea, Canada, Italy, Spain, Israel, and Britain have all had their citizens taken hostages. Still, the governments of these countries (with the exception of Spain perhaps) have not openly entertained the option of withdrawing troops. Their resolve suggests not only their resistance to terrorist demands, but also their understanding of the risks inherent in a dangerous and volatile country.

Still, the terrorist attack is an acute reminder for Koizumi and his government of the risks of their decision. Even after the resolution of the current hostage crisis, the possibility of future attacks on Japanese will remain as long as Japanese troops, diplomats, reporters, NGO staff, and other personnel continue their activities in Iraq. Koizumi, while taking steps to alleviate the Japanese public's concern about future attacks on those who are in Iraq, must continue to articulate why it is in Japan's national interest to support the war against terror, as well as reconstruction in Iraq. Only then will the public accept the government's argument for maintaining close support for Iraqi reconstruction efforts.

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