



From the JDA to the MoD- a step forward, but challenges remain by Yuki Tatsumi and Ken Jimbo

On Jan. 9, 2007, the Japan Defense Agency (JDA) became the Ministry of Defense (MoD). While this elevation in status was long overdue, formidable challenges await the MoD as it tries to find its place and role in an emerging new decision-making structure in Japanese security policy and establish itself as a key player therein.

Throughout the Cold War, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), and particularly its North American Affairs Bureau, played a central role in shaping Japanese security policy. The role of the JDA, established in 1954 as an agency under the Cabinet Office, was confined to: management of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to maintain an exclusively defense-oriented posture, coordination with local governments in Japan that host U.S. and SDF bases, and addressing issues that arise from the crimes committed by U.S. soldiers based in Japan. With the tight limits on its military activity, the JDA has functioned primarily as a “management agency” (*kanri kancho*) rather than a “policy agency” (*seisaku kancho*).

In many ways, the relationship between the MOFA and the JDA during the postwar era reflected the nature of the U.S.-Japan alliance during the Cold War when Japan made very little tangible military contribution to the alliance. The discussion between Tokyo and Washington was predominantly about the political and legal aspects of the U.S.-Japan alliance, such as the U.S. obligation to have prior consultations regarding actions taken by U.S. forces in Japan, or the rights of U.S. forces personnel. This made the Department of State (DoS) and MOFA, the signatories of these agreements, the lead agencies in managing the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Changes came with the end of the Cold War. As pressure began to mount on Japan to make more tangible contributions to the efforts to improve the international security environment, there were also expectations of a growing JDA role in Japanese security policy. In particular, SDF participation in international activities including UN peacekeeping operations (PKO) obligated the JDA to play a greater role. Changes in the international security environment and changing expectations of Japan also resulted in a greater emphasis on the military aspect of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Consequently, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) became a lead agency on the U.S. side in alliance consultations.

Alliance developments in the post-9/11 world — SDF dispatch to the Indian Ocean and Iraq, closer cooperation in ballistic missile defense, announcement of “common strategic objectives,” as well as the transformation of the U.S.-Japan alliance and U.S. force realignments — propelled this trend,

making old procedures, in which MOFA took the lead in Japan’s relationship with the DoD as well as the DoS, not only illogical but inefficient.

What does it mean now that the JDA is a ministry? Domestically, it means that the MoD enjoys bureaucratic status equal to the MOFA, which effectively enhances its position vis-à-vis MOFA and theoretically ensures a leading role for MoD in security policymaking in Japan. Furthermore, ministerial status allows the MoD to take control of critical administrative procedures, such as submitting its own legislative proposals to the Diet, or negotiating a budget with the Ministry of Finance. It also brings prestige which will boost the morale of civilian MoD officials as well as the SDF officers.

While taking effect in a separate law, inclusion of “international activities” — PKO, international disaster relief, rear-area support in case of regional contingencies — in the SDF’s core mission should not go unnoticed, either. This provides a legal framework for the SDF to participate more robustly in activities that improve the international security environment. This is consistent with the principles put forward both in the “common strategic objectives” outlined in the Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee in February 2005 and the 2004 National Defense Program Guideline.

Given the expansion of the role played by the JDA and the SDF in post-Cold War Japanese security policy, the JDA’s elevation to a ministry is a positive step. However, before the MoD can truly transform itself into an institution capable of playing a leading role in shaping Japanese security policy, several important challenges remain.

First, the MoD must develop a stronger policy-planning capacity. The MoD remains domestically oriented, and still primarily functions more as a management agency. Now that it is a ministry, the MoD will have to be able to present its long-term strategy and visions for Japanese security policy. While the JDA has invested in developing an institutional capacity to do that, it is far from sufficient. For instance, the MoD will create a “strategic planning office” in September as a part of its reorganization effort to enhance its policy-planning capacity. But what is envisioned is far too small to adequately perform this function. The MoD should explore a more comprehensive reorganization that includes creating an office that, similar to MOFA’s Foreign Policy Bureau, coordinates policy for the ministry. It also should create bureaus that focus on regional security affairs so that it can build regional security policy as well as functional expertise in security affairs. Most important, it must invest more in developing human resource and encourage officials to gain policy-making capacity. Increasing the number of

“internationalists” that are policy-savvy with a high level of security policy expertise is critical.

Second, the MoD must improve coordination with other government agencies. Throughout the Defense Policy Review Initiative (DPRI) process, the JDA took the lead in negotiations with the United States, but a lack of coordination between the JDA, MOFA, and other government offices was evident from time to time, sometimes bringing negotiations to a standstill. This led many observers of the U.S.-Japan alliance on both sides to question whether the JDA is “ready” to become a ministry. JDA’s elevation to a ministry cannot result in an escalation of the bureaucratic tug-of-war with MOFA. Since Japan’s decision-making system is increasingly centralized around the prime minister and the Cabinet Office, establishing a solid coordination mechanism — most notably under the new National Security Council (NSC) to be established — with the Cabinet Office is crucial.

Finally, the role of the Internal Bureau (*naikyoku*) must be reexamined. Historically, the Internal Bureau has supervised all aspects of the SDF — from procurement to personnel — to include “keeping the SDF down” under the name of civilian control, arguing that doing so will prevent the SDF from returning to its militarist past. However, this is an anachronistic management model when the SDF is encouraged to expand the scope of its activities beyond Japan’s borders. Now that Japan has a mature democracy, it is a time to rethink the role the Internal Bureau played vis-à-vis the SDF, and consider a fundamental reorganization based on the principle that civilian officials and SDF officers work in partnership to shape a security policy for Japan, so that the MoD can proactively participate in the security policymaking process.

New security policymaking structure

Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan is reforming its decision-making process on national security issues and creating a more centralized structure. In September 2006, two prime minister’s advisory groups were established. One is examining the utility of creating a National Security Council (NSC) in the Cabinet Office, and the other is exploring how to enhance the intelligence capacity of the Cabinet Office. Both advisory groups are expected to present their recommendations in February. While these recommendations will have a considerable impact on the debate over the institutional framework for Japanese national security policy, the system that will emerge remains uncertain.

It is in this context that the MoD must establish itself as a proactive player in Japanese security policy. This won’t happen overnight. But it is critical that the MoD tackle the structural challenges now, so that it can play a major role in shaping the Japanese security agenda in what is envisioned to be a more centralized decision-making process.

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