



SDF's New Anti-Piracy Base Creates a Dilemma

By Yoichi Kato

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Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) opened their first overseas air base since the end of World War II in Djibouti, in the Horn of Africa, on July 1. The base is intended to beef up Japan's anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden. This enhanced presence has been warmly welcomed by the government of Djibouti, and by US and French armed forces which have already been deployed there. But none of them thinks this new base will bring about a quick improvement of the situation – because the root cause of the piracy is not out at sea, but on the ground in the neighboring failing country of Somalia.

The formal name of the base is “Japanese Facility for Counter-Piracy Mission in Djibouti.” The Japanese government avoids the word “base” because it implies a permanent deployment. Japan looks at 10 years at the most for now.

The base is located next to Djibouti International Airport. It uses the runway of the airport. Its main mission is to support counter-piracy operations by the SDF. Since 2009, the SDF has been conducting both escorts by destroyers and aerial surveillance by P3C aircraft. There are currently two P3Cs and approximately 200 personnel deployed in this new base.

The SDF was originally stationed within the neighboring US base Camp Lemonnier, but Japan decided to build its own facility to provide a better quality of life for the sailors, soldiers, and pilots and also to improve logistical support for the operations.

Among the guests from Japan at the opening ceremony on July 7 was the president of the Japanese Shipowners' Association (JSA), Akimitsu Ashida. He praised Japan's decision to establish this new base, saying, “This will be a great deterrence against the pirates.” JSA has been the main driver in pushing the enhancement of anti-piracy operations.

Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, Djibouti's minister for foreign affairs and international cooperation, also welcomes Japan's enhanced presence, saying, “We are happy to host them.”

The commanders of both US and French forces based in Djibouti echoed the minister's sentiments. But none of them thinks that Japan's enhanced presence will make immediate difference in the situation.

According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) and the Japanese government, the number of pirate attacks has been decreasing within the Gulf of Aden, where the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) has been conducting surveillance

and escort operations along with other countries' navies. But the pirates who were chased away from that area are now finding new hunting grounds in the Arabian Sea or the West Indian Ocean off the coast of Kenya. Ashida describes the situation as a cat-and-mouse game.

The overall number of attacks by Somali pirates has actually doubled, from 111 in 2008 to 217 in 2009. The number was 219 last year and has shown no sign of decline. A recent report by US Congressional Research Service (CRS) concludes, “The increase in pirate attacks off the Horn of Africa is directly linked to continuing insecurity and the absence of the rule of law in war-torn Somalia.” Foreign Minister Youssouf echoes this view, saying, “The root cause of piracy is indeed the Somali crisis.”

Some 30 countries, including Japan, have dispatched their warships and maritime patrol aircraft for these anti-piracy operations. And there is a consensus that “the answer is not on the sea but on the ground,” a quote attributed to Maj. Gen. Thierry Caspar, commander of the French forces in Djibouti.

To address the root cause, Youssouf stresses the importance of assisting the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia. He believes it is indispensable in order to establish the rule of law in Somalia. He also points out the need for deployment of a United Nations peacekeeping operation (PKO) force in Somalia to provide security for TFG to function.

The minister also emphasizes the necessity to trace and disrupt the money-laundering network for ransom to weaken the piracy operations. Such criminal networks are thought to extend beyond the border of Somalia even into Europe. All of these measures to address the root cause of the piracy premise the deployment of ground troops to Somalia. But this “boots-on-the-ground” option has almost no prospects because the US has no intention to put its troops back in Somalia. As the result, “The piracy attacks will not decrease. The phenomenon will just keep growing,” Youssouf says.

Rear Adm. Michael Franken of the US Navy, commander of Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa, said that “it may take as much as a generation” before the anti-piracy operations will no longer be necessary. Youssouf also points out that “Japan's Self-Defense Forces may stay longer if the Somali political crisis is not sorted out rapidly.”

The day after the opening ceremony of the new base in Djibouti, Japan's Cabinet decided to extend the anti-piracy operation by one year, maintaining the current strength of two P3Cs and two destroyers.

Ashida, however, asks for an “expansion of the maritime patrol area” to deal with the geographical proliferation of Somali pirate attacks. He wants a replenishment ship of the MSDF to be dispatched to extend the operational reach of the

destroyers. This idea was once discussed, but it has not been realized, mainly because of a lack of political consensus in Tokyo.

Ashida has another suggestion. It is to “seal” the entire coastline of Somalia so that the pirates cannot go out to the sea. But this operation, of course, requires many more naval assets, and he does not think it is feasible, nor does the government of Japan.

The United States has a similar idea. Rear Adm. Franken explained in an interview with *The Asahi Shimbun* his plan to “contain” Somalia. “One line of effort is to ensure that the extremist activity in Somalia does not leave Somalia and take root elsewhere,” he said. “The other effort via the US State Department is to train other nations’ forces as African Union Mission in Somalia.”

Maj. Gen. Caspar also told *The Asahi Shimbun*, “France prefers to have military protection teams on the French ships.” He said “it is very useful and it is working.”

The other military option being considered by European Union forces is stand-off attacks on the de facto base of the pirates in Somalia from the sea. The purpose is both to show the will to penalize the perpetrators and to disable them by destroying their boats. There is tacit support within the Japanese government for this kind of military option to end the cat-and-mouse game with the pirates. But Djibouti’s foreign minister is worried that such a military action could cause collateral damage.

Whatever the strategy of other countries, Japan officially has not expressed any intention to go beyond the current plan, which strictly focuses on the escort and air surveillance operations off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden. The new SDF base does not in any way indicate an expansion of Japan’s operations. But it is regarded as the manifestation of Japan’s firmer will to continue its commitment to the stability of this region and even to expand it. There is little doubt that the withdrawal of the SDF has become much harder.

Jun Shimmi, Japan’s ambassador to Djibouti, told *The Asahi Shimbun*, “The reality is that we won’t find a just cause to withdraw for the foreseeable future.” “Since there is neither a quick fix nor a panacea, Japan has no choice but to continue with our assistance to Somalia as measures to address the root cause of the problem,” the ambassador said.

Considering these circumstances, Shimmi expressed reservations against expanding the scale of the SDF’s anti-piracy operations. The question is whether this kind of limited engagement approach of Japan can produce results that would justify the national investment and also meet the request of commercial shipowners for their safety of navigation.

Another reality is that Japan’s enhanced presence has led other countries to expect Japan’s expanded engagement and commitment. When asked about a possible SDF dispatch to South Sudan, which recently gained its independence, Foreign Minister Youssouf said: “Why not? If you are ready, I think it is a good thing.”

Rear Adm. Franken pointed out: “I think gone are the days when you can have a narrow view of activity in a particular region. It has to be all-encompassing. It has to stretch across many lines of longitude, many lines of latitude. It’s just the nature. And that’s, perhaps, the way Japanese people might want to look at their base here.”

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