



Peacekeeping: As Good For The Alliance As It Is For Japan? by Paul Giarra

Peacekeeping operations loom ever larger in the Japan Self-Defense Forces' evolving mission. In fact PKO will help to define Japan's international security posture and become a major determinant of alliance politics and Japanese force structure in the 21st century.

Those in the U.S. who claim that Japan never listens should eat their words. Tokyo has listened carefully to Washington's imprecations that Japan must do more for mutual defense and regional and global security. A series of events – the end of the Cold War; the Persian Gulf War; the evolving danger in Korea--has moved Japanese politicians, diplomats, defense bureaucrats, and JSDF commanders to work harder to expand Japan's relevance to international security.

The political resurrection of Ichiro Ozawa means that Japanese peacekeeping policy is about to change substantially. Ozawa has suggested that Japanese PKO operations should parallel those outlined in the U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines, allowing JSDF troops to participate up to the point of direct combat operations. No longer will JSDF participation depend on the absolute acquiescence of every country involved. Japanese units will share the risks of peacekeeping – and Japanese commanders will be able to direct the defense of their units if attacked.

Ozawa's ability to force change on the Japanese system by leveraging the LDP's need for his Liberal Party votes in a coalition was no mean feat. In essence, Ozawa compressed into just a few weeks a political evolution that might have taken a decade to achieve by standard consensus politics. In doing so, he positioned Japan to take a leading role in international peacekeeping.

PKO and its extensions – disaster relief and humanitarian operations – will become a major operational and force-building rationale. Almost certainly, the next Mid-Term Defense Plan will increase emphasis on the kinds of amphibious and air support capabilities for the JMSDF (navy), airlift for the JASDF (air force) and deployment potential for the GSDF (army) needed to support such missions.

Centrifugal Forces. But Americans should not be surprised if Tokyo takes an independent path that minimizes reliance on the U.S. The principle of self-reliance is no longer the exception, but the rule in certain aspects of alliance relations. Japan has avoided getting involved with the U.S. in peacekeeping for a number of reasons. Clearly national prestige, pride, and self-reliance are a part of it. These centrifugal forces – the U.S. has its own share – are constantly wearing on the security relationship.

But beyond that, the U.S. military loathes peacekeeping operations. They are open-ended, messy and lack clear objectives. They wear out troops and equipment, and detract from traditional warfighting budgets, training, experience, and martial valor. The U.S. military has avoided them wherever possible. So even when the JSDF had been disposed to cooperate in the past, it didn't happen.

Russian Airlift. There was a moment during the 1994 Rwanda refugee crisis when the two countries might have done so. At U.S. urging, Japan agreed to send a military medical and transport contingent to Goma, Zaire. Much to Tokyo's chagrin, however, the U.S. was unable to line up support for what the Japanese Cabinet had thought would be a joint operation. U.S. forces left the week before the Japanese arrived, in a sense pulling the rug out from under JSDF. The U.S. couldn't even provide strategic airlift. Ironically, Japanese troops arrived in Goma on chartered Russian aircraft. In the sense that it gave wrong answers to a lot of questions about future cooperation, that was a bad day for the alliance.

Partly as a result, peacekeeping and disaster/ humanitarian relief operations quietly disappeared from the Defense Guidelines – a real setback. They had been important elements of the original Guidelines scheme, as a way for U.S. and Japanese forces to practice on a fairly constant basis, and in a low-threat environment – the very same kinds of cooperation they might need in an East Asian contingency.

Instead, alliance cooperation was notable by its absence when the JSDF deployed to Honduras after Hurricane Mitch last fall. What could have been a golden opportunity to cooperate on problems, demonstrate solidarity, and showcase Japan's Western Hemisphere debut, wound up as a unilateral show of the flag. The Japanese contingent operated on its own--and went home after just two weeks, even though hundreds of Hondurans were showing up daily.

As a matter of both principle and practice it is vital for the U.S. and Japan to get back on the same PKO wavelength. How we work together in small but consequential ways now will set the course for much more important missions in the future.

Paul Giarra is a former Defense Department official who is writing this article in his private capacity. His article appeared in the The Daily Japan Digest on February 9, 1999 and is being reprinted with permission.