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Japanese Peacekeeping Policy at a Crossroads

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On October 26, 2005, the Japanese Diet passed a law to extend the Japanese naval support for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) by one year. It is also likely that the Japanese government will extend its mission in Iraq this month.

The maturing of the Japanese security policy debate led to the controversial deployment of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to the Indian Ocean in October 2001 to support OEF and to Iraq in February 2003 for a humanitarian mission and logistical support to the multinational force there. Although in the past Japanese anti-militarism could have prevented such military deployments, the changing nature of the Japanese perception regarding international security made overseas military deployment without Blue Helmets a realistic option.

The recent trend of Japanese foreign military deployment shows that Japanese policy toward international security has come to encompass not only participation in traditional UN peacekeeping operations, but also in coalition-type operations. In the past few years, we have seen remarkable developments in Japanese security policy. The 2004 National Defense Program Guideline (NDPG), which sets the long-term security goal and defense modality of Japan, defined International Peace Cooperation Activities as “activities that nations of the world cooperatively undertake to enhance the international security environment.” This is a harbinger of Japan’s more proactive foreign policy in the near future.

In the move for Japanese participation in the US-led war in Afghanistan and Iraq after 2001, the legal system proved to be unhelpful in non-UN sanctioned military operations. Thus, the Japanese government adopted special measures laws at a record-breaking speed to send Japanese troops and warships abroad. This effort was decisive enough to show its willingness to contribute to international efforts to fight terrorism and its recognition of the US-Japan alliance in a global context. Yet as these legislative processes were essentially ad hoc, the government needs to devise a comprehensive security strategy for international peace operations.

The Japanese government was swift in tackling these issues. In May 2002, Prime Minister Koizumi declared in Sydney that the government would initiate a review of Japanese international cooperation in post-conflict peace building. In the same month the government set up a blue-ribbon panel to review Japan’s international peace cooperation. Based on the recommendation paper (Akashi Report) compiled by the commission, Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda established a task force consisting of officials of related governmental agencies to review Japan’s international peace cooperation in August 2003.

The Japanese government also has been reviewing security strategies in the post September 11 security environment. In April 2004, the Prime Minister established a Council on Security and Defense Capabilities to hear expert opinion on Japan’s new security strategy. After six months of serious discussion among its members and government officials, the Council issued a report “Japan’s Vision for Future Security and Defense Capabilities” (Araki Report). The report was significant in proposing that participation in collective security operations is a matter concerning Japan’s own security, not merely a contribution to international peace and stability. This was a major development of security perception in the last decade.

The Japanese government’s policy reviews culminated in the newest National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) in December 2004. This Guideline was a departure from previous policy statements in that the government took a strategic approach in security and foreign policy, countering the criticism that the 1995 National Defense Program Outline

(predecessor of NDPG) was merely a shopping list for the SDF. For example, the government declared that the primary goal of Japanese security policy is the defense of Japan and that the second is improving the international security environment. Participation in peace operations is obviously conducive to both goals. Also, the NDPG recognized the importance of an integrated approach and defined the areas from the Middle East to East Asia as the geographic focus of Japanese security policy. More important, the government defined international cooperation under the assumption that the peace and stability of Japan is inextricably linked to that of the international community.

In the above-mentioned processes, Japanese policymakers recognized international peace operations as an effective tool for pursuing national interests. Like the NDPG, peacekeeping policy should set specific goals, taking into account not only the notion of improving its international security environment but also Japan's own energy security and economic interests. Active participation might serve to strengthen Japan's position in a bid for permanent membership of the UN Security Council in the future. This can help develop a closer relationship with host countries and other partners in peace operations if successfully conducted.

If Japan wants to show its willingness and capacity to contribute to international peace, the number of UN peace missions can be a barometer. Its financial contribution to the UN is seen as a reflection of Japan's economic weight and public attitude towards the UN. It is important to recognize that the only Asian permanent member of the Security Council, China, and another emerging power in Asia, India, far exceed Japan's personnel contribution to the UN collective security system. China sends military and police forces to 13 UN peacekeeping missions; India to 10 missions; and Japan to one mission. The number of personnel participating in missions shows starker contrast: China 1026; India 6176; and Japan 30 (as of June 2005).

Japan's enthusiasm for international peace can be demonstrated in another way, however. The participation of infantry troops could easily raise the number of Japanese personnel. But infantry battalions are provided in sufficient numbers by developing countries that have much experience in suppressing riots and civil wars in their home countries. UN peace operations usually lack military services that require highly trained personnel and state-of-the-art equipment. Therefore, Japan can better contribute in quality by focusing on highly skilled services such as air-transportation, engineering, and medical treatment and headquarters personnel.

To effectively participate in various peace operations in the future, the following points should be addressed in the ongoing government review process.

Reestablishing basic principles--Japan has imposed strict constraints on its peace operations since its inception in 1992. The Five Principles for Peacekeeping Participation (ceasefire agreement, consent of the all parties to the conflict, impartiality, unilaterally withdrawal if the above three conditions cease to exist, minimum use of force only in self-defense), embedded in the International Peace Cooperation Law, are intended to prevent SDF personnel from participating in enforcement operations. As a result, SDF units can be deployed only after the formal termination of a conflict. Yet the UN PKOs after the Cold War often targeted civil wars; and the international effort to fight global terrorism is conducted without any ceasefire agreement, thereby making these principles obsolete. Japan would be better off establishing new principles for peace operations.

Building a more effective SDF--The JDA can be the leading actor among Japanese agencies if it can articulate its demand for a wider role in international security. It has a relatively large capacity to participate in peace operations and possesses systems and training necessary for combat situations although its ultimate goal in peacekeeping is essentially humanitarian. It is noteworthy that the JDA decided to establish a Joint Staff Council and a training corps for international peace operations. These are positive steps toward professional engagement in international peace efforts.

Increased dispatches of civilian police--Security sector reform (SSR) is increasingly important in UN operations. Increased dispatches of civilian police are a natural outcome of a country that seeks a more important role in international security. Since Japan's first participation in UN peacekeeping in Cambodia, Japanese civilian police officers have played a significant role. Unfortunately, they also suffered casualties from the outset. Unlike other countries that have a gendarmerie, Japanese police are not trained and equipped to operate in war zones. In the past, the Cabinet Office and MOFA, both of which are responsible for dispatch, have never been able to support the police officers, thereby casting a heavy burden on the National Police Agency. The government should have a better system of providing training, logistic and financial support for police officers.

Enhancing dispatch of non-governmental experts--The increased role of non-governmental civilian experts in international peacekeeping should be considered since recently-established peace missions require civilian expertise in addition to military and police skills. The Akashi Report argued that non-military resources are vital to achieve our goal of maintaining international peace. To enhance the dispatch of civilians, the government needs to train personnel regularly, assist education in skills necessary for working in post-conflict areas, and support them once they are dispatched to a war zone. In this sense, the Cabinet Office' employment of four civilian experts early this year to develop an effective civilian dispatch system is a positive sign.

Strategic use of ODA for international security--The new NDPG stated that the strategic use of ODA is important to improve international security. This is the first time the Japanese government officially recognized that security and economic assistance are inseparable. The turf rivalry between MOFA's development section and JDA has prevented coordination between civilian expertise and the SDF. But the Japanese experience in Iraq changed the relationship. Now each side recognizes the importance of the other to make the most of Japan's limited resources.

GHQ for peace operations in the cabinet--To overcome the sectionalism among agencies and exploit each agency's expertise, a general headquarters for peacekeeping that directs governmental agencies should be established at the cabinet level. The Prime Minister's Office needs to play a leading role in planning a comprehensive peace-building strategy. In the last decade the Cabinet Secretariat established general headquarters for such contingencies as armed attack against Japan or huge natural disasters.

Having a real national contingent commander--The Japanese contingent commander who leads troops participating in peace operations should have the authority (at least operational control) over Japanese personnel on the battlefield to effectively deal with crises. In the current system, the authority of the field commander is limited to his unit members. As a result, no Japanese official in the field is able to grasp what is happening to all Japanese personnel in case of emergency. Peace operations are often conducted in a quasi war-zone using military standard operating procedures. All personnel involved in such operations should be trained and organized accordingly.

In the past decade, the UN-centered policy and the constitutional issues dominated peacekeeping policy debates in Japan. Yet the Japanese have begun to realize it is time to devise comprehensive strategies and systems for its role in maintaining international peace. That is certainly a challenging task for a pacifist country. Nevertheless it would surely improve Japan's status from a free-rider of collective security to a responsible member of the international community.

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