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Japan, South Korea Agonize Over Troop Dispatch to Iraq

by Yoichi FUNABASHI

The Koizumi administration is in turmoil over the dispatch of the Self-Defense Forces to Iraq. According to public opinion polls, 70 to 80 percent of Japanese people are against it. The South Korean administration of President Roh Moo Hyun is also agonizing over the same problem. While South Korea plans to contribute an additional 3,000 troops to the 700 already there, 70 to 80 percent of South Koreans are opposed to the proposed reinforcement.

Two Japanese diplomats and two South Korean engineers were killed in Iraq. Although the leaders of both countries have declared that they would not give in to terrorism, the situation in Iraq has deteriorated into virtual guerrilla warfare between local insurgents and the U.S.-led occupational forces.

In both Japan and South Korea, people are losing their faith in the government. Elections are scheduled for next year in both countries, South Korea in the spring and Japan in the summer.

However, there are differences between Japan and South Korea in the arguments for and against the dispatch of troops in terms of dynamics and direction.

· In Japan, opposition parties are objecting to the dispatch, while in South Korea, it is the other way round: The opposition (in particular, the Hannara Party) is pressing the government to dispatch troops.

· In Japan, opposition is stronger among the older generation, whereas younger people lead the opposition movement in South Korea. In both countries, experience of war seems to be a factor. Roughly speaking, in Japan, people who experienced World War II are against the dispatch, while in South Korea, people who lived through the Korean War are supporting it. Older South Koreans tend to think that "sending troops would help strengthen the U.S.-South Korea alliance."

· Japan's defense authorities are cautious about sending ground troops, while South Korean defense officials have shown a positive stance from the beginning. A South Korean defense official said: "We are getting so many applicants volunteering to go to Iraq that there is only one opening for every 11 applicants." The trend shows the eagerness of South Koreans for promotion in military service and merit.

In both Japan and South Korea, the greatest reason for dispatch of forces is the maintenance of their alliance with the United States. However, South Korea emphasizes this point more clearly.

A senior official of the Blue House (South Korea's presidential office) offered the following explanation: "In the last five years, anti-American sentiment accumulated in South Korea. As a result, Americans are becoming increasingly critical of South Korea. Considering such circumstances, we have no choice but to send military personnel to Iraq.

"If the United States fails in Iraq and pulls out, it will be in big trouble. When that happens, North Korea would not seriously deal with the United States."

South Korea's motives behind its dispatch of troops are very specific: It does not want to be abandoned by the United States and hopes to maintain and strengthen its deterrence against North Korea. It shows how much it feels obliged to the United States to prove itself "a trustworthy ally."

A high-ranking South Korean government official grumbled: `"The United States complains to South Korea but not to Japan.

"At first, the United States secretly demanded that we dispatch a light infantry division. Although Rumsfeld did not explicitly push us during his recent visit here, he did not disguise the fact that he was inwardly disappointed that we are sending only 3,000 troops."

But unlike Japan, which cannot freely dispatch the SDF as a military force, South Korea has no such restrictions and is free to send a fully fledged army. Of the 3,000 troops, 1,600 are believed to be special forces, which have the capability and mission to fight guerrilla forces.

"If we send soldiers who cannot even defend themselves and something happens, it would cause others great trouble. What's the good of dispatching useless forces?" the high-ranking official asked.

They think it a matter of course for soldiers to defend themselves. Some lawmakers are calling for a reinforcement of 5,000 troops because they attach importance to self-sufficient "self-defense."

Meanwhile, Japan has a problem of its own, but it lacks the resolve to defend itself.

However, even South Korea is not completely self-sufficient militarily. First, it lacks intelligence capability.

"That is our greatest weakness. We have no choice but to rely on the United States for intelligence," said Cha Young Koo, deputy minister for policy of South Korea's Ministry of National Defense.

Second, it is unable to draft an "exit strategy" on its own. It may be able to dispatch troops but it cannot make an independent decision about when to pull out and under what circumstances, Cha admitted.

"It's not that South Korea is playing a leading role, after all. We have no choice but to decide while working closely with the United States," he said.

Incidentally, how does South Korea view Japan's dispatch of troops? Which is more desirable to South Korea, a Japan that sends the SDF or one that doesn't?

Lee Kyeong Jae, a lawmaker with the opposition Hannara Party, remarked: "We think it is time that Japan also dispatch the SDF to contribute to world peace and we welcome it. At the same time, in light of past Japan-South Korea relations, we are worried that Japan's SDF dispatch could accelerate the move to revise its peace Constitution. Personally, I find myself wavering between the two."

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