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Japan's Indian Ocean Naval Deployment: Blue water militarization in a "normal country"

By Richard Tanter

[By most standards, Japan is now the world's number two naval power. This article, and the accompanying *Asahi Shimbun* series on Japan's four year Maritime Self Defense Force deployment to the Indian Ocean, reveals how far Japan's military reach now extends within the framework of US-Japan alliance. See the five-part *Asahi Shinbun* report, [Japans New Blue Water Navy: A Four-Year Indian Ocean Mission Recasts the Constitution and the US-Japan Alliance](#)

Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force destroyers and refuelling supply ships have been continually on-station in the Indian Ocean since November 2001. The MSDF ships were dispatched under the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law (2001), which has since been extended a number of times beyond its original two year period of application. [1]

Deployments began with the dispatch of the supply ship *Hamana* (8,150 tons) and its destroyer escorts *Kurama* (DDH - *Shirane*-class, 4,400 tons) and *Kirisame* (DD - *Murakame*-class, 5,200 tons). The stated purpose of the contingent was to provide a Japanese re-fuelling capacity to the multinational forces operating in the Indian Ocean against Afghanistan following the U.S. attack prompted by the 9/11 bombing attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In December the following year, after considerable controversy inside the ruling party and cabinet, Aegis-air defense system-equipped *Kongo*-class destroyers were included amongst the escort vessels, ostensibly to meet the air defense needs of the supply ships. As of the beginning of 2006, the supply ship *Tokiwa* had been on station for a month, escorted by the same *Kirisame*.



The *JDS Tokiwa* supply ship refueling the destroyer *Sawagiri*

Between 2001 and mid-2005, according to the *Asahi*, forty seven MSDF ships have participated in thirteen rotations on station. By October 2005 MSDF supply ships had supplied 552 ships in the multinational force, dispensing fuel worth 155 hundred million yen.[2]

Rules of engagement

But the Japanese mission is not limited to supplying fuel. The *Asahi* articles make clear that one part of the MSDF contingents duties has been interception of vessels regarded as suspicious. The *Asahi* cites JDA statements about 11,000 inspections, and "many crews" arrested.[3] The *Asahi* comments wryly, "however, it is not clear how this work actually contains terrorists." In fact, a great deal is unclear about the Japanese activities in "Operation Enduring Freedom - Maritime Interdiction Operations (OEF-MIO)". The precise guidelines the MSDF is using are not known, though the *Asahi* refers to use of US guidelines concerning suspicious ships. The *Asahi* cites an example where the boarding of a ship was left to a Canadian navy ship, apparently authorised to do so where the MDSF was not. [4] Yet the precise Rules of Engagement and legal framework under which the MSDF is operating in these interdiction operations is not known, nor is the fate of those "many crews" arrested.

The question of the precise legal arrangements governing these interdiction operations in the Indian Ocean now overlaps with the issue of the legality of multinational operations to interdict alleged weapons of mass destruction under the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative, to which Japan is a party. The MSDF is an eager partner in this developing capacity, and Japan hosted one of the first PSI multilateral naval and coast guard exercises off the coast of Sagami Bay ("Team Samurai 04") in October 2004.[5] For the blue water interdiction ambitions of the MSDF, four years of practical experience in the Indian Ocean is invaluable.

Changes in the Indian Ocean deployment

As the Ground Self Defense Force commitment to Iraq winds down, there is no sign that this MSDF Indian Ocean deployment will be abandoned. However, during the past four years, the pattern of activity and the character of the deployment has gone through important changes. As the *Asahi* notes below, the height of refuelling activities corresponded with the attack on Afghanistan itself, but the attack on Iraq led to another spike in supply work.

In 2005, the number of escort vessels was reduced from two to one, and most importantly in the November 2005 deployment, the supply ship was no longer accompanied by an Aegis-class destroyer. There were most likely two reasons for this, neither suggesting a scaling back of Japan's naval role in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf.

Firstly, in 2004 the Koizumi government committed Japan to rapid deployment of a theatre missile defence system in conjunction with the United States, the most potent part of which will be the sea-based system centred on Japan's four Aegis-class destroyers. All four Aegis-class ships - the *Kirishima*, *Kongo*, *Myoko* and *Chokai* - spent time on the Indian Ocean station, but all four are undergoing advanced Aegis training with the US Navy, in preparation for their new duties. [6]



The DD173 Kongo is equipped with the advanced Aegis combat system

Secondly, the primary reason for dispatching the *Kongo*-class Aegis ships in the first place was not, as was stated by the government at the time, air defense for the supply vessels. The smaller but still highly competent *Shirane*- and *Murakame*-class destroyers were more than capable of handling any conceivable local area ocean air defense. The real reasons are not completely clear, but undoubtedly have to do with the prodigious area-wide surveillance and tracking capacities of the Aegis air defense system operated by the *Kongo*-class ships. These would have enabled the MSDF ships to cooperate with both US and UK navy and air units operating not only in the Indian Ocean, but possibly over Afghanistan itself. The possibility has also been raised that they were used to provide air defense warning for the approaches to the giant US-base on Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago – a crucial and ongoing staging ground for both the war on Afghanistan and the war on Iraq.

More generally, the Indian Ocean deployment has been of enormous value to the MSDF itself, by providing a very large portion of the MSDF's ships and personnel with war zone experience. The MSDF thus gained practical experience of multilateral operations in theater, with all the trials of inter-operability, communications difficulties, differing rules of engagement, and differences in organisational culture.

"Inter-operability" – the capacity to work together with military forces of other nations, is clearly a technical requirement for any effective multinational force – whether under UN auspices or any other. The importance and difficulty of achieving this goal is clear from this Canadian navy discussion:

"These obstacles are commonly grounded in such factors as disagreements or misunderstandings over mission goals, priorities and rules of engagement (ROEs); the reliance of different coalition contributors on different types of equipment, or on similar equipment with different specifications; the commitment of the various national forces involved to incompatible tactical, organizational, leadership or other professional doctrines; the involvement in coalition campaigns of units that have been exposed to unrealistic and/or insufficient training and preparatory exercises; and a variety of other factors, ranging from different organizational cultures to outright policy disagreements at the highest levels of national decision-making. Left unattended, such sources of behavioural divergence can create havoc in the field, particularly when many of the national contingents involved are not large enough to be logistically, and in other respects, self-sufficient." [7]

Almost immediately in 2001, the MSDF rapidly discovered how little prepared it was for large-scale operations far from home – and hence welcomed the opportunity for expansion of its capacities as a true "blue-water navy". While most attention has gone to the role of accompanying destroyers, the impact of the distant deployment experience is evident in the rapid development of larger supply vessels than were available in 2001, such as the newly launched 13,500 ton *Mashu*, deployed in November 2004, almost twice the size of its predecessors.

In addition to the MSDF deployments documented below, and the GSDF deployment of more than 600 troops on reconstruction duties in Samawa in the southern Iraqi province of Al Muthanna, there has also been a series of Air Self Defense Force deployments that have led to a constant ASDF presence, amounting to more than 264 transport flights as of February 22, 2005. [8]

The Indian Ocean deployment and Heisei militarization

However, the Indian Ocean operations have received much less criticism. The Indian Ocean deployments are well away from the public eye, and little is known in detail about them. In contrast to the deeply politicised debate over the dispatch of SDF troops to Iraq, there was little public discussion and less criticism of the MSDF dispatch and its continued involvement in the region now in its fifth year. Neither scholars nor journalists have been effective in efforts to penetrate the veils surrounding the operations.[9]

But it is not just distance and absence of concrete information that explains the relative acceptance of this deployment. Much more than the Iraq deployment, the MSDF deployment can be presented as part of Japan's contribution to international cooperation against transnational terror, thus gaining the crucial legitimacy in Japan of association with legitimate United Nations-linked activities. The legislation under which the MSDF continues to operate in the Indian Ocean is the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, and is continually presented to the Japanese public in such terms.[10]



The JDS Bungo participating in an exercise with the US fast attack

The real military capacities of the SDF as a whole have been steadily and effectively expanded over the past decade and a half, in a process I have described as Heisei militarization.[11] Especially in the past five years, through changes in law, foreign policy and security high level doctrine, operational guidelines for cooperation with US forces, SDF rules of engagement, force structure, and military planning, Japan has removed many of the pre-existing restraints on the use of its already materially extremely powerful military forces.

Some of these shifts were underway in the 1990s, especially in the implementation of the 1997 Japan-US Mutual Security Treaty Guidelines, but much more followed in a rush of legislative, organisational, and doctrinal changes precipitated by the 9.11 attacks. US concern to reposition Japan within US global strategy coincided with the desire of the dominant elites in the LDP, Foreign Ministry and Defense Agency to push away both the domestic and foreign restrictions on Japan becoming a "normal state" status. This process of Heisei militarization, driven by both US pressure and domestic elite preferences culminated in the two momentous decisions of 2003-4 to deploy a theater missile defense system, whatever the consequences may be for relations with China, and to deploy ground troops in Iraq.

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[1] See Gavan McCormack, "Japan's Afghan adventure", *Japan in the World*, November 5, 2001. www.iwanami.co.jp/ipworld/text/Afghanexpedition01.html

[2] The supply statistics are set out in Kaijō Bokuyō Kanbu, Hōkyū yūsō kyōryō shien katsudō nado no jisseki ni tsuite, H17 (2005) .12.6 www.jda.go.jp/JMSDF/about/haken/hakenkyōryō/sienkatudou/index.html. The Indian Ocean rotations are set out in detail in *Kantei no shutsunyu minato kiroku*, H17(2005).12.6. www.jda.go.jp/JMSDF/about/haken/hakenkyōryō/kantei/index.html, and in "Jieitai Indoyō Haken", *Wikipedia – Japanese edition*, (accessed, 24.2.2006).

[3] See also Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Achievement of Operation Enduring Freedom-Maritime Interdiction Operation (OEF-MIO)", October 2005, www.mofa.go.jp/policy/terrorism/effort0510.html#2

[4] A Canadian Naval Task Group similar in composition and size to the MSDF contingent was deployed in the Arabian Sea in November 2001, and is still on station under the code name of Operation Apollo. See "Canada's Military Contribution To The International Campaign Against Terrorism" www.navy.forces.gc.ca/mspa_operations/operations_e.asp?x=1&id=5, and "Canada's Naval Task Group Arrives In Arabian Sea", CJTFSWA 01-01 - November 23, 2001, www.forces.gc.ca/site/newsroom/view_news_e.asp?id=294. There is a detailed and useful [account](#) of the Canadian Marine Interdiction Operations in United States Central Command, *Canada*.

[5] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) Maritime Interdiction Exercise "Team Samurai 04" (Overview and Evaluation)*, October 28, 2004. www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/disarmament/arms/psi/overview0410.html

[6] See "Commands we train", Center for Surface Combat Systems detachment, Yokosuka, US Navy, www.yoko.atrc.navy.mil/commands.htm

[7] Danford W. Middlemiss and Denis Stairs, "The Canadian Forces and the Doctrine of Interoperability: The Issues", *Policy Matters/Enjeux Publics*, June 2002, Vol. 3, No. 7. www.irpp.org/pm/archive/pmv03no7.pdf

[8] For data on ASDF Middle East operations to February 2006 see ASDF, *Iraku fukkō shien haken yūsō kōkūtai ni yorū yūsō katsudō jisseki*, www.jda.go.jp/jasdf/iraq/jisseki.htm.

For ASDF contingent rotations see ASDF, *Iraku fukkō shien haken yūsō kōkūtai*, www.jda.go.jp/jasdf/iraq/iraq_contents.htm

[9] This is evident when writing on the MSDF deployments is compared with the work of activist-researchers such as Peace Depot's Umabayashi Hiromichi, whose creative use of the US Freedom of Information Law has made it possible to document important new understandings of the US Aegis-class missile defense patrols in the Sea of Japan. See his "Okushirijima seihō 190 km sakusen kuiki", *Kaku Heiki/Jiken Monitā* (239), August 1, 2005, online at www.peacedepot.org/nmtr/bcknmbtr/nmtr239.pdf

[10] For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release announcing the October 2005 extension of this law was headed: *Japan decides to continue to dispatch MSDF vessels to the Indian Ocean in order to support international efforts to fight against terrorism (Extension of the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law)*. www.mofa.go.jp/policy/terrorism/measure0510.html

[11] Richard Tanter, "Japanese Militarization and the Bush Doctrine", *Japan Focus*, (221) www.japanfocus.org/article.asp?id=221, and at length in Richard Tanter, "With Eyes Wide Shut: Japan, Heisei Militarization, and the Bush Doctrine", in *Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Critical Views from the Asia-Pacific*, edited by Peter Van Ness and Mel Gurtov, (RoutledgeCurzon, 2005).

[12] See GlobalSecurity.com, *Japan Maritime Self Defence Force Nihon Kaijō Jieitai*, www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/japan/jmsdf.htm

[13] For a brief but insightful examination of an emerging case for a reassessment of this claim with respect to China, see You Ji, "A New Era for Chinese Naval Expansion", *China Brief*, Volume 6, Issue 5 (March 02, 2006) : "The PLAN is firmly committed to move in the direction of achieving partial superiority in a specific war situation relatively close to home waters. This will force the navy to add more advanced warships and sophisticated IW measures in the years to come. Consequently, this persistent modernization will gradually produce capabilities for long-range power projection beyond the initial combat design. The civilian leadership seems to have committed itself to providing enough national resources to this naval leap forward. Liu Huaqing's blue-water dream may be brought to reality sooner than we expect."

[14] The 200-strong ASDF contingent operating three C-130 Hercules transports is currently based in Kuwait, and flies regularly into southern Iraq. Recent reports suggest it will operate more widely in Iraq itself, and from Qatar. See "SDF to pull out from Iraq in April-May", *Nikkei Net Interactive*, February 27, 2006