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Japanese Foreign Policy in Light of the Iraq War

by Yakushiji Katsuyuki

Like the Gulf War of 1991, the Iraq War of 2003 sent tremors through Japan's foreign policy establishment in the face of widespread Japanese opposition to the U.S. invasion, and particularly to U.S. invasion in the absence of an authorizing U.N. resolution. This article, written on the eve of invasion, explores the Japanese government decision to support the U.S. war despite its deep misgivings and considers the implications for eroding Japan's constitutionally enshrined no war principles. The author particularly emphasizes Japan's dependence on the U.S. in light of the crisis in Japan-North Korea relations that surfaced simultaneous with the road to war in Iraq. "Japanese Foreign Policy in Light of the Iraq War," by Yakushiji Katsuyuki, was published in Aera on April 5, 2003.

Japan daunted by "Doubts about the Alliance"

Doubts about an increasingly unilateralist U.S. leads to "support" for military action.

They say Japan will help with refugee support and postwar reconstruction, but...

Not a few Foreign Ministry officials are vexed by the Japanese government's policy of support for U.S. military action.

One hears complaints that "without a U.N. resolution, there is no basis for overthrowing the Hussein administration according to America's own agenda, nor for the advance of democratization in the Middle East. It's a foolish decision. But, at present, Japan has no alternative but to back U.S. policy since the current U.S. administration is self-centered."

There is a serious problem implicit in this less than straightforward support.

It is clear that the Foreign Ministry misread the course of events this time, when it expected France to eventually support the U.S., leading to adoption of the Anglo-American draft Security Council resolution. It thought all that was needed was for Japan to wait until then.

Around the middle of February the Ministry realized how overly optimistic it had been.

Anti-war demonstrations were growing in every region of the world. Middle Eastern countries were negative about the military action. The Turkish parliament denied stationing of U.S. troops. France's opposition gained in strength, having been joined by neighboring Germany. Russia and China were also opposed.

Using the usual promises of economic aid, Japan tried to persuade neutral Security Council nations to back the U.S., but was unable to achieve the desired results.

The Threat from the North and Doubts toward the U.S.

Not only was the U.S. unable to take the lead in the United Nations, an arena for international cooperation, it ended up in the minority. But the Japanese government's policy of support for American military action remained unchanged.

The stated reasons include Iraqi non-compliance with UN weapons inspections and the idea that doing nothing would lead to the spread of weapons of mass destruction. But the real reason comes from the threat of North Korean plans for developing nuclear weapons and doubts about the Bush administration's increasing emphasis on a unilateralist foreign policy backed up by the projection of military power.

Last October, North Korea admitted to Assistant Secretary of State Jim Kelly, who was visiting North Korea as a special envoy, that they were planning to construct uranium enrichment facilities. Ever since, the tension between the U.S. and North Korea has only heightened.

The U.S. suspended heavy fuel oil deliveries on the grounds that North Korea had violated the Agreed Framework, which called for a North Korean freeze on nuclear weapons development in exchange for the construction of light water reactor power plants. The Americans also show no indication of negotiating. Feeling more isolated, North Korea has taken increasingly extreme measures. While demanding a non-aggression

pact on the one hand, it also forced International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to leave the country. It cut the seals on existing graphite reactors, and restarted some of them.

The war of words between the U.S. and North Korea seems only to escalate:

The Korean Central News Agency: It is only natural for the DPRK to arm itself and produce various types of weapons by every possible means, since the threat of U.S. aggression has become real.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld: The North Korean leadership is doing idiotic things. We are capable of [simultaneously] fighting two major regional conflicts in Iraq and North Korea.

If North Korea continues to heighten tensions this way--beginning ballistic missile tests, fully restoring its nuclear development program, and announcing that it has nuclear weapons--the country put into the most difficult position is Japan.

Redefining the U.S.-Japan Security Relationship

The Japanese government and LDP emphasize that Japan doesn't have the military capability to attack North Korea on its own, so it must rely on American military might and the "nuclear umbrella" under the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. It is for this reason in particular, they say, that Japan must support the attack on Iraq and maintain good relations between Japan and the U.S. But this is very odd reasoning, for the government and LDP have, ad nauseam, trumpeted the U.S-Japan alliance as the mainstay of foreign policy, and firmly supported the bilateral security arrangement.

If we were not to support the attack on Iraq, regardless of what North Korea does, would the Japanese-American relationship deteriorate so badly that the U.S. would just stand by and do nothing? Can't Japan give advice and make requests if we think that U.S. military action is wrong? Under such conditions it is only natural for doubts about the instability and fragility of the alliance to arise.

Both Japan and the U.S. reassessed the meaning of the Security Treaty in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War.

Many Japanese have argued that since the Soviet threat ended with the Cold War, the Security Treaty should be reviewed and the number of U.S. troops in Japan reduced. The "redefinition of the U.S.-Japan security alliance" was what the two governments hammered out, expanding the security arrangement to contribute to the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region, and clarifying the two countries' respective roles in the process. Japan enacted the Regional Contingencies Law to allow it to implement the guidelines for U.S.-Japan defense cooperation. In reaction to 9/11, it created the Anti-terrorism Special Measures Law, laying the groundwork for Japan's Self Defense Forces (SDF) to provide rear support to American forces.

U.S. Unilateralist Policy

Officials in the Foreign Ministry and the Defense Agency have all been emphasizing that as a result of these continuing efforts the U.S.-Japan security structure has been strengthened and the relationship is better than ever.

But if that is the case then why has the Japanese government been so nervous over whether or not to support the attack on Iraq?

The reason is the change in U.S. administration.

After the terrorist incident the year before last, the U.S. became all the more unilateralist. It privileges its own interests over the stability of any region of the world. Accordingly, it has begun to disregard international conciliation. No military force is spared in the national interest. And this is justified under the casuistry that defines "allied countries" as those who support and aid the U.S. In its "Basic Strategies for Japan's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century," a report submitted last November, the Prime Minister's Task Force on Foreign Relations, an advisory group chaired by cabinet secretary consultant Okamoto Yukio, analyzed the recent U.S. situation this way. "The U.S. is losing its spirit of tolerance toward opposing opinions and differing value systems. It has suppressed this inconsistency with its overwhelming power, but because of this it is possible that the moral authority of U.S. foreign policy will weaken."

Put simply, the U.S. is dividing the world into enemies and allies, and using force to bring the enemies into line.

Limited Policy of Support

Why is it that the Japanese government must support a Bush administration of this sort? One Foreign Ministry official revealed the reality behind support for attacking the Iraq. "The Bush administration increasingly refuses to listen to other countries' opinions. Precisely for this reason we have to put ourselves in the position of being owed. This will work to Japan's advantage when you consider the North Korean problem." Even if U.S. logic is somewhat self-serving, Japan has to turn a blind eye. It is an alliance built on an accounting of "give and take." And here, in contrast to the Cold-War era of "follower diplomacy," one sees instead serious doubts about America.

So, what will the Japanese government do now that it has established a posture of support? The fact is, under current law there are limits to what can be done.

Legally speaking, of course, the SDF cannot participate with the Anglo-American forces in battle. It cannot even supply such rear-guard support as refueling and provisioning. But, under the anti-terrorism special measures law Aegis-equipped vessels and refueling supply ships continue their logistics activities in the Indian Ocean. Even if indirectly, Japan's Maritime SDF ships activity there will no doubt enable American ships to concentrate that much more on Iraqi operations.

Japan contributed $13 billion to the Gulf War. Will Japan end up contributing this time as well? The Foreign Ministry maintains that the U.S. has stated it will not request that Japan contribute to war costs. It seems likely that this won't become an issue and, even if it did, we probably could not comply because of fiscal conditions.

The SDF is investigating on its own the rescue of resident Japanese nationals from Iraq and surrounding countries, maritime security activities to assure the safe passage of tankers carrying oil to Japan, removal of mines set by the Iraqi military or terrorist groups, and such refugee support activities as shipment of relief supplies to refugees in countries neighboring Iraq. But aside from refugee support, in reality, hardly any role is considered to exist for Japan. The year before last the Self Defense Forces law was amended so that, if requested, Japan could provide extra security around U.S. military bases in Japan.

Refugee Relief and Postwar Reconstruction

The most important task for the government is domestic anti-terrorist policy.

It is undeniable that by supporting the attack on Iraq Japan becomes a potential terrorist target. All ministries and agencies will be involved as anti-terrorist measures will have to be wide ranging, including provisioning vaccines against biochemical agents, checking for suspect postal goods along the lines of safeguards in place in the U. S. after the anthrax scare, preventing terrorist targeting of public transportation facilities such as airlines and the bullet trains, and strengthening the security of water resources and waterways.

The Japanese government is currently most worried about how to participate in the postwar reconstruction in Iraq rather than the war itself.

When military action ends, the major task for international society will become the reconstruction of destroyed petroleum facilities in addition to restoration of basic supporting infrastructure of a war-wasted Iraqi landscape, beginning with Baghdad. If only because Iraq possesses the second largest petroleum reserves in the world, every country will want to participate in postwar reconstruction, regardless of whether it supported military action.

The Japanese government too is planning to dispatch the SDF and others to participate in such activities as shipping and relief provision, medical services, search and rescue of wounded, and road and airport repair. The SDF already has experience in these activities from U.N peacekeeping operations (PKO), and technically there isn't a problem. But, under current law, the SDF cannot be sent to Iraq. The regional contingencies law allows rear-guard support, the PKO legislation permits participation in U.N.-sponsored peacekeeping operations, and the anti-terrorism special measures law makes it possible to dispatch ships to the Indian Ocean. Support for Iraqi reconstruction falls under none of these. A new law is necessary to allow the SDF a role in Iraq.

The Prime Minister's Office and Foreign Ministry are working on legislative proposals, but things do not seem so simple.

First, it is doubtful whether Japan can dispatch the SDF without the sanction of the international community, such in the U.N.

There is also the opinion that international law provides no justification for the American use of military force without a new U.N. resolution, nor for a U.S. occupation afterwards. As one Defense Agency official acknowledged, "Critics will probably be able to label it an American military invasion. It will probably be

difficult to gain Diet approval for sending the SDF there to participate in the reconstruction effort."

The Foreign Ministry has already begun pressuring the U.S., arguing that a U.N. resolution sanctioning Iraqi reconstruction would be necessary to legitimize SDF participation. The calculation is that, if the activities have been sanctioned by a U.N. resolution, they could be justified and the law would be easier to explain.

The question of the possible scope of SDF activity remains. In Afghanistan, even after the serious combat had ended, minor skirmishes with terrorist organizations continue in every region. In Iraq too, there will be no simple end to skirmishes. It is likely that the strife will continue for a long time in every region. Under these conditions, will the SDF really be able to confine itself to shipment, supply, and repair of roads? Some have pointed out that the SDF is unlikely to get away without providing rear-guard support for some small level of military action. "In Afghanistan rear-guard support for U.S. military action was permitted. Limiting the SDF to reconstruction activities in Iraq will run afoul of the anti-terrorist special measures law."

"Assertive Foreign Policy" Nowhere in Sight

Why is it that whenever something happens we rush to enact laws, repeating a pattern of confusion and haphazard reaction? The above-mentioned report from the Task Force on Foreign Relations put it this way. "When confronted with clearly visible changes or trends for which the outcomes are certain, it has become increasingly the case that Japan's foreign policy seeks to simply treat the symptoms without facing the situation head on. This is the responsibility of both politics and administration."

In the 1990s, the Foreign Ministry groped for a new post-Cold War foreign policy, looking to develop an autonomous foreign policy along with strengthening U.S.-Japan alliance. However, the response this time has been somewhat removed from Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro's oft-used line in the Diet, that he will "decide in an assertive manner."

Translated by James Orr for Japan Focus

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