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by Umebayashi Hiromichi

It is abnormal for a country to host foreign troops in peacetime.

For such a situation to remain in place, there must be an international agreement between the sender and receiver of the troops. In the case of U.S. armed forces stationed in Japan, the two countries have an agreement in the form of international law -- in this case, the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. In other words, U.S. forces are allowed to stay in Japan only under "the rule of law' as stipulated by the treaty.

Article 10 of the security treaty states that the treaty shall terminate when the two governments agree that "United Nations arrangements will satisfactorily provide for the maintenance of international peace and security in the Japan area.' Thus, the framework is restrictive.

Consistent with such restriction, the treaty also sets up some conditions for U.S. troops stationed in Japan. They can either counter armed attacks against Japanese territories (Article 5) or contribute to maintaining the security of Japan and international peace and security in the Far East (Article 6, also known as the Far East clause).

For some time, there has been debate concerning the legitimacy of the operational practices of U.S. forces in Japan.

According to the U.S. government, the ongoing global restructuring of U.S. forces is the most comprehensive since the cease-fire of the Korean War. As such, it could change the premises of the argument about the U.S. troop presence in Japan. Thus the U.S. government has repeatedly made a public pledge to re-examine the stationing of its troops while consulting with its allies and obtaining their consent.

On Nov. 25, 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush released a statement to officially announce the beginning of the global posture review talks and called on friends and allies to fully participate in the process.

For Japan, the process presents an ideal opportunity to settle the problems concerning U.S. bases in Japan. Unfortunately, however, the Japanese government has been slow to react.

In my view, the Japanese government has the following two deep-rooted difficulties related to the U.S. bases.

First, it has been unable to provide a satisfactory explanation to the Japanese public why more than 50,000 U.S. troops (including crews of warships with home ports in Japan) are still stationed in Japan.

Second, the government has failed to come up with effective plans to reduce the excessive burden on Okinawa, where U.S. bases are heavily concentrated. This despite the fact that Tokyo is well-aware of the danger the bases pose, as illustrated by the recent crash of a helicopter from the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma on a university campus.

To begin with, these problems are not so simple that they can be solved with stopgap measures.

On the contrary, they are so serious that they will be overcome only when the Japanese government accepts its responsibility for security policy and public debate gets off the ground.

The debate is expected to be one that asks the Japanese people just what kind of relationship they want their peace-oriented nation to develop with the heavily-armed United States seeking military dominance.

The United States has repeatedly explained why it needs to carry out a comprehensive review of its military at this juncture. The explanation once again reveals the need for Japan to have a fundamental domestic debate.

To start with, the United States based its argument to reorganize the military on the awareness that the global military posture established during the Cold War cannot effectively counter new threats of the 21st century. In short, the U.S. military is trying to mark the end of an era.

This is an awareness that Japan can share. Japan also needs to put an end to this period if it wants to resolve difficulties it faced in the past.

However, U.S. military forces have adopted a new policy. It is summarized in testimony by U.S. Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith before the House Armed Services Committee on June 23:

"Now, nearly 15 years after the end of the Cold War, we no longer expect our forces to fight in place; our forces need to be able to project power into theaters that may be far from where they are based.'

As far as U.S. forces stationed in Japan are concerned, this is an idea that Japan cannot readily accept.

As mentioned earlier, U.S. troops are allowed to stay in Japan under a limited framework stipulated by law. Japan is a constitutional state. For

Japan to accept this change, the security treaty needs to be revised.

Of course, Japan is under no obligation to follow U.S. logic.

If Japan wants to attach greater importance to U.S. relations, it should clearly present its own vision and logic and clarify its differences with the United States.

Up to now, public debate to squarely address the U.S. military presence in Japan has been avoioded despite the fact that such debate was badly needed.

But as the helicopter crash in Okinawa Prefecture plainly showed, we can no longer sit back and do nothing to rectify the situation.

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