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Japan in Iraq in Japan: a perspective

By Adam Lebowitz

Time Maps

In spring 2004, Shuzenji and three small Shizuoka Prefectural towns were consolidated into Izu City. Perhaps to celebrate, early this year City Hall distributed fancy calendars to the residents. Usually these are simple affairs from the agricultural cooperative with snapshots of local life – Mt Fuji landscapes, rice harvesting, the geta marathon, and the like. This year, however, someone decided to do one better: it was a glossy affair printed by Yasukuni Jinja, now adorning a sitting room in my father-in-law's house. Half calendar, half guide book for the shrine's own particular blend of tourism history, each month features a time, event, or individual of pride. Not surprisingly, one entry is dedicated to the tokkotai brigade, whose suicide missions are read as victories for national spirit if not tactics (that explosive-laden human torpedoes were named baka, or "idiot" puts in doubt how respectful state leaders actually were of their young charges).

Another month commemorates the 100th anniversary of an equally glorious victory: the Russo-Japanese War. This is a military triumph savored by nationalist Japanese, not least because it was won on the high seas against a major Euro-Asian power. The Japanese Navy -- even in English the name contains its own internal logic – has a palpable hold on the national, and not only the nationalist, imagination. The battleship Yamato might have been dispatched to a watery grave soon out of the drydock near the end of WWII, but it continues to ply the universe in a classic sci-fi anime and is commended in a popular museum. Today launches are attended by cabinet members, including the Prime Minister decked-out in black tie and tails, top hats pressed firmly against sternum. Photographs of Aegis ships on the high seas to Afghanistan adorned the LDP homepage a few years ago.

Writing in a commemorative edition of Fujisankei Communications' Seiron, military historian and commander of the battleship Chitose, Hirama Yoichi portrays the war as a positive force in anti-colonial struggle. Along with stimulating nationalist movements in Southeast Asia, Arab and Islamic cultural and political leaders in the early 20th century admired and sought to emulate Japan. Writers and poets from Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, Morocco, and Iraq praised not only the victory itself, but what they perceived was the social construct necessary for an effective armed force: a feeling of national cohesion embodied in the "caliphate" Emperor. Some politicians in Japan at the time were even willing to exhibit camaraderie: Former Prime Minister General Hayashi Tetsujuro became chair of The Japan Islamic Association established in a Yoyogi mosque in 1938.

I read these memorializations of the Russian war with an eye to nationalist inferences to the Ground Self Defense Force's Iraq mission. To advocates of militancy such as Hirama, heiwa boke is an ill to be corrected, perhaps not so much the heiwa – "peace" – aspect, but the boke. The colloquial verb boketeru means to be a space case, both feet firmly planted in the air, trapped in stasis. The first syllable when extended becomes the onomatopoeia for staring empty-eyed at nothing. Therefore, when Hirama finishes his piece "Will the heiwa-boke Japanese be able to protect the body of water bearing their name?" the overt reference is to adversaries closer to home, notably North Korea across the Japan Sea. However, his article suggests a moving, active, and dynamic Japan, that is a Japan that exercises military options.

"Henshin-change!!"

It is unclear if the young soldiers held on the Samawa base in Southern Iraq agree with Admiral Hirama's interpretation of history and see the Iraqi war as the next logical link in a chain of moral campaigns starting in 1904 and reaching its high water mark with the Pacific War. However, even if morality were to flow from the barrel of a gun (to coin a variant on Mao), the dispatch to Iraq has been plagued by lack of clarity of purpose, moral or otherwise. Part of the problem is that each pair of boots on the ground is meant to cover the feet of two entirely different, indeed competing sets of wearers.
As is often the case, the problem was summed up most coherently in a political cartoon. Those Folks in the Planetary Protection Family (Chikyu Boeika no Hitobito) is a four-frame political manga by Shiriagari Jun printed in the Asahi Shinbun. In the 2 July 2003 strip, Mother watches tv news and is concerned that, contrary to Koizumi's assurances, the GSDF purposes are in fact being sent to purify water in a war zone. Father proposes a solution: A new kind of superhero, a young, enthusiastic NGO volunteer who, when trouble arises, will jump into the air ("TO-O-OH!") and land fully transformed into a unformed, fully-armed soldier ("HEN-N-NSHIN!"). Mother, beads of sweat forming on her brow, can only answer, "What in the world…?"

This soldier-as-Ultraman paradigm espoused by the LDP did appear to make sense even to the smart, moderate academic set such as Tokyo University professor Kitaoka Shinichi. Writing in Chuo Koron in February 2004 – three months after the dispatch – he believes that the assassination of diplomatic corps members Oku and Inoue proves that civilians are being targeted and requires that any aid givers to Iraq carry guns: Médicins-avec-M16. His support for dispatch is anchored in habitual arguments – "civilized countries" are engaged in a "war on terror", other countries are sending troops, not sending will be injurious to Mutual Security agreements – but he adds his own: If major secondary participants such as Spain and Italy withdraw, without the presence of the SDF there will be a "domino effect" eventually forcing the US to do the same.

This is nonsense: The Bush administration has no plan whatsoever to withdraw its forces regardless of real or symbolic support from allies, indeed, even if fighting stops, KBR is constructing permanent bases to maintain the US military presence. In fact it is difficult to see the GSDF in this case as any more than a third-string expeditionary force behind the US, sent as a token of the special relationship with Washington. The vagaries of the Japanese mission reflect the dangerous vagaries of a proclaimed "war on terror".

Constitutional problems aside – especially the troubling issue that the GSDF's presence may actually create a new battlefield – there is one question that remains studiously avoided: since when is an armed force actually more effective at providing humanitarian assistance than an NGO or an agency of civil government? Evidence actually may point to the contrary. Peace Winds Japan began medical and construction projects in the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq in 1996 and is engaged in projects in more than half a dozen countries including Afghanistan and post-Katrina U.S. According to their web site they are continuing to re-build hospitals

destroyed in air strikes in Baghdad, Mosul, and Kirkuk. The continued movement of Peace Winds inside Iraq exposes a flaw with the costly militarized Ultraman model: most NGO's will explain that the secret of success is neutrality, something that military humanitarian programs demonstrably lack. That is, GSDF assistance is clear intertwined with other "Coalition" such as the full-scale attacks that destroyed Fallujah and other cities, killing many. That and other military actions have alienated the local population whose cooperation is necessary for success.

Whither the Riku-gun?

Samawa's heat climbed to 60°C (110°F) this summer. With power available only ten hours every day, residents had to buy ice for refrigeration, and a scarcity of potable water reduced many to bottled water. Unemployment remained at fifty percent. Eventually local frustration metasticized into violent action. On 23 June a 60mm shell landed near an SDF convoy, and following three days of demonstrations in late July during which a crowd of 700 young men marched on the governor's residence, a riot ensued on 7 August. Police responded with gunfire against a rock-throwing crowd, killing one and injuring 60. SDF ground forces Chief of Staff Mori Tsutomu was forced to admit, "The present situation is different from the past." As a result of this violence, and above all the terror attack on London transport, the SDF locked down and confined troops to base.

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Commanders of the mission might have been forewarned of the riot if they had read the 4 August Mainichi Shinbun. Writing from the relative safety of Cairo, reporter Takahashi Muneo had two Iraqi colleagues check the mood on the Samawa streets. It seems that residents, many of whom had been extremely hopeful at the outset, had become increasingly critical of the Japanese military presence. Fortunately, troop leaders had scrupulously followed protocols of local courtesy and were still held as guests by tribal chiefs; yet there was bafflement even as the chieftains criticized the demonstrators. What on earth was the GSDF doing here? "Why are improvements so long in coming?" wondered one. Echoing these sentiments, an interviewed driver said, "They painted a school. Anyone can do that. You'd expect a G8 country to be able to do more."

Expectations were running high, possibly too high, concludes Takahashi. It is not hard to see why. As Sakai Keiko has said in these pages, http://japanfocus.org/article.asp?id=196, Japan is to Iraqis the "Japan, Inc." of the 1970's and '80's, master builders of roads and other infrastructure throughout the country. When it became clear that the GSDF is not, local support declined. "They don't even come into town," complained one shopkeeper. Worse still, the GSDF has come to be identified with the occupation. Whereupon, another of Professor Sakai's forecasts has come to pass: the local al-Sadr office has gained influence and led the July demonstrations. Other historical precedents may be repeated. To quote Sakai again, "Tribes in Samawa once played a very big role in anti-colonialism (against the British) in the 1920s. If they again feel that this is their historical role, they will join that anti-occupation movement."

Conflicting historical perceptions to the fore again. Even within Japan there appears the argument: who do the rikugun, the GSDF serve? Of which community is it a member? PM Koizumi says "international society", former GSDF soldier Kuhara Sojiro would prefer the UN, and intrepid, irreverent photojournalist Miyajima "Fusho" Shigeki suggests the US occupation forces (albeit with the caveat, "Not that it matters."). Kuhara's article (June '05 Jiyu) is instructive. Although akin to Hirama's political orientation, he has received considerably less formal schooling than the law doctorate-holding admiral and sounds less the ideologue. His focus is the more immediate concerns of mission success and troop safety. Much of his article directs criticism at critical journalism and anti-war movements, implying that these jeopardize both success and safety, yet there is no denying his concern for the boots.

His views are interesting for two reasons, and not only because they are so impassioned, dulled neither by aged reminiscence nor elitism. First is his realism: The Samawa mission will be justified insofar as it succeeds. Second, there is the sense that he supports Iraqi nation building as long as it is done by the Iraqis themselves. In other words, the UN must get in on the game because it will allow the Japanese contingent wider grounds to defend themselves (in this respect he is critical of the self-defense doctrine contained in Article 9 since it is narrower than the UN charter). Therefore, Kuhara does not subscribe to the logic of pre-emptive attack – in fact, he says outright that GSDF deployment is not meant to be an endorsement of the US's WMD argument – but he strongly upholds independent military participation in humanitarian assistance abroad in the name of national security.

Therefore we can see a divergence between Kuhara's "soldier's view" and those of other militarists such as Hirama, but more markedly with former Admiral Sakuma Makoto. Interviewed in the 9 August Yomiuri Shinbun under the byline "Protecting the Country" ("Kuni-Mamori") Sakuma is former Naval Chief of Staff. Most significantly he commanded the spring 1991 mine-clearing operation in the Persian Gulf to protect commercial vessels, notably oil tankers. A forerunner of the current dispatch, this was Japan's first post-war overseas operation specifically targeting national security.

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During his tense – if somewhat self-serving -- account of defusing a mine, Sakuma recounts that in light of the risk, he asked the older members of the crew to take the lead since younger seamen had not yet had the chance to enjoy life. The cant is touching, yet discredited somewhat in a later statement. Were there to be casualties in a past or a future operation, he continues, the SDF would undoubtedly suffer damage – the English word in katakana form which decreases its resonance with deaths – but later would fukkatsu, that is recover or be reborn. In other words Sakuma appears ultimately more concerned with the institution of the military rather than the individual lives of the soldiers. This, of course, is the language of "national sacrifice", but all the same contrasts with Kuhara.

The source of their differences might well lie in disparate views of history. As the topmost echelon of Naval command, Hirama and Sakuma see themselves traveling in the wake (literally and figuratively) of other Japanese sea heroes such as Togo Heihachiro who defeated the Russian fleet in the decisive battle of Tsushima in May 1905 with minimal Japanese losses. The ground campaign around Port Arthur in southern Manchuria is a different story altogether. Of approximately Japanese 60,000 battle dead in total, 58,000 fell on this front. The commander was General Nogi Maresuke. A samurai by birth and training, he relied on tactics from a previous era: his full frontal attacks were decimated by Russian machine gun batteries – the victims including his two sons. Perhaps this was part of the bereavement that led him to commit seppuku with his wife upon the death of the Meiji Emperor in 1912. A shrine in his name in Tokyo elevates him to a semi-deity status, although it advertises itself more as a wedding venue than a hallowed ground of national sacrifice.

Home Fires: Burning?

The violent incidents of this summer in Samawa were extensively reported in the Japanese press. However, the mission appears to have fallen off the Japanese radar screen as PM Koizumi focused his reelection bid exclusively on the issue of postal privatization and the media docilely followed. Perhaps no news is good news, but a lack of journalistic presence is certainly a reason. Iraq's dangers following the killing of a veteran journalist ("Hashi-yan's Last Dispatch from Iraq) last year May could have contributed to the silence. The exception was a series of short photographic essays appearing over four issues (14 July – 4 August) of the popular weekly Shukan Bunshun by "Fusho" ("Unworthy") Miyajima. Miyajima is an independent photojournalist and was a close friend of Hashida Shinsuke. His four-week visit was his third and his total time in Samawa exceeds the average three-month SDF troop rotation. His shots of soldiers in full battle gear operating heavy equipment and wielding mallets in the summer heat are affecting. A convoy of trucks transporting food from Kuwait guarded by UK mercenaries gives an idea of the scale of the operation and potential hazards.

Miyajima's tone is ambivalent, even insouciant. More often than not he is frustrated by not being allowed entrance into the gate, or else surprised the base would lock itself down due to the London bombing terrorism attacks (not so unpredictable, he fumes). Not one to stand on ceremony, he poses spread eagle in front of a photo-op for the presentation of water trucks. The overall impression is of a well-maintained if over-loaded and heavily armed force laboring at basic construction projects that are usually accomplished by NGO's working with the local population, and not entirely sure what to do in the event of an emergency. His new book of Iraq photos on sale this month should illustrate more completely the situation. His previous book, published in May, Samawa's Hottest Day: Yelling "Idiot!" ("Baka!") in Deep Country, is a tribute to his friend Hashida.

The GSDF will sooner rather than later have to make clearer decisions about security. Although Koizumi and the LDP appear ready to extend deployment yet another year from December – and their new parliamentary majority assures that they have the means to despite the fact that neither the LDP nor the opposition addressed the Iraq deployment – the foreign security cordon may not last so long. Australia and the UK announced last week plans to withdraw troops from the area by the middle of next year. This could force Koizumi, or more likely his successor, to admit publicly that the GSDF may be required to engage in combat, which would in turn require the constitutional amendment that many in the LDP seek.

Public response to this and other long-term loin-girding commitment to the "war on terror" (which includes most visibly rebuilding sections of Tokyo Station, and converting Camp Zama in Kanagawa into an intelligence center that tightens U.S.-Japan global military bonds) is not easily foretold. Without a doubt there is a new permissiveness towards open expression of nationalistic fervor in society. The Yasukuni war anniversary ceremony and their calendar exemplify this. So, too, Isasumi Jinja in central Fukushima: fifteen years ago it was a quiet, relatively well turned-out country shrine. Now it advertises nationally in the neonationalist journal Shokun! as a place of prayer.

It is not surprising that leaders of such groups have striven to designate the issue of North Korean kidnapping in the 1980s a terrorism problem. Thus the "war on terror", primarily a US construct, has been embraced by the more nationalist wing in Japan. Such thinking is closely linked with the image of armed Japanese soldiers in foreign climes as yeast for the nationalist imagination, regardless of the value of the operation or its success, and regardless of casualties. Koizumi's success has been to balance policy between nationalist goals and faithfully serving the ends of American militarism in Iraq and elsewhere. If SDF counter-terrorism deployment increases in future it will be a reflection of concerns for the former as much as the latter.

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