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by Gregory Clark

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The bad news is that the Japanese government wants to send troops to Iraq. Tokyo's rush into overseas military involvements is far stronger than anyone would have imagined possible even a few years ago.

The good news is that this time Tokyo has probably gone too far. In its efforts to legitimize an overseas role for its Self-Defense Forces, it has chosen an area that will probably rival the Vietnam War in brutality, moral ambiguity and ultimate defeat. If Japan's volatile public opinion reacts negatively, those efforts could well turn to dust.

Thirty years ago even the sending of military attaches to work at Japanese embassies abroad was seen as a breach of Japan's "peace" Constitution. But through skillful use of a Japanese technique called "nashi-kuzushi" -- the gradual whittling down of principled opposition by creating precedents -- even the sending abroad of entire military units, complete with weapons and aircraft, is now supposed to be seen as quite normal.

Labored efforts to join in U.N. peacekeeping missions in distant places like Cambodia, Rwanda, East Timor and the Golan Heights provided the initial nashi-kuzushi. The sending of SDF planes and ships to evacuate Japanese nationals from trouble spots like Cambodia or Indonesia, even when no one wanted to be evacuated, added impetus.

Each time, the SDF people could indulge in their parades, medals, flags, bands, ceremonies, military songs and expanded budgets without even having to face the threat of casualties. Afghanistan, with its chance to provide logistic support for the United States in a war against something called "terror" (still not defined, incidentally, despite being made part of the law of the land), was the icing on the cake.

Iraq is seen as a natural escalation. This time there probably will be casualties. But for Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and his hawkish advisers that is probably not unwelcome. They like to talk about the need for Japan to "shed blood" in support of various pro-U.S. causes. They want to galvanize the Japanese public out of "heiwa boke" (peace-loving stupor), and to force Japan's wimpish SDF to become a bloodied, and full-blooded, fighting force.

But can this happen if the blood is shed for a shabby cause fought brutally and unfairly in a distant country and with little chance of success? This is what we saw in Vietnam. It is very likely what we will see in Iraq.

From the beginning, the U.S. foray into Iraq was hampered by lack of credibility. Many focus on the failure to find weapons of mass destruction. But WMD did exist, and were used, in the form of the gas attacks against Iranian troops subject to Iraqi aggression in the 1980s. The problem there, of course, is that the U.S. supported both the aggression and the gas attacks.

Similarly with the belated argument that the U.S. had to move against a tyrant, Saddam Hussein, whose victims are now being excavated in the thousands from mass graves. The U.S. backed that tyrant when he was executing many of those victims. It even provided the lists of leftwing Iraqis to be sent to the torture and execution chambers in the early days of Hussein's rule.

Curiously, the same U.S. is saying nothing about the thousands now being excavated from mass graves in Guatemala. Here, too, the U.S. was also involved in supporting both the killings and the tyrants responsible.

Several other brutal Latin American regimes received the same considerate U.S. treatment.

The other two main excuses for U.S. intervention -- to cut alleged links to al-Qaeda "terrorists" and to create a model of Middle Eastern democracy free from Islamic extremism -- are pure fantasy. The main result of the U.S. action will probably be to turn a nation free from al-Qaeda links into yet another hotbed of anti-U.S. "terrorism," and to push one of the few secular Middle Eastern societies into the embrace of Islamic extremists.

As I predicted almost a year ago over Afghanistan, the clumsiness and cruelty of U.S. military interventions around the world can easily encourage a Vietnam-style guerrilla war response. As in Vietnam, for each person roughly interrogated or killed, there will be a dozen friends and relatives keen to get revenge. As in Vietnam, the militants have the advantage of being able to move freely and secretly through the sea of a supportive population.

And already, as in Vietnam, we have the same outflow of self-deluding U.S. propaganda, bright shining lies and pathetic demands for the unseen enemy to come out into the open and be obliterated by U.S. military superiority. But in Vietnam there was at least a government on the ground to support U.S. military efforts. In Iraq there is nothing. The real parallel could well be Chechnya rather than Vietnam, which is even worse.

Meanwhile Japan's public will face daily reports of anarchy, atrocities and brutal killings in which Japan's military will be indirectly, and even at times, directly involved. Japan's hawks will have a lot of explaining to do.

To date, the hawks have had a clear run in the media and elsewhere with their calls for campaigns against "terrorism," automatic support for U.S. military adventures, respect for nationalistic symbols and education, and expanded roles for Japan's military.

The public's postwar allergy to the trappings of military power has gradually been worn down. But if the image from Iraq is one of tattered military power and defeat, that could be just the shock needed to bring Japan back to some badly needed heiwa boke.

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