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Japan Raises Security Profile in Global War on Terror

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Japan's 2003 defence white paper, published early this month, rightly recognises terrorism as one of the most serious issues in international security today. Instead of the risk of a full-scale war between powerful states, the threat of terrorism has emerged as the most prominent security concern for many states. As the September 11 attack on the US epitomises, terrorist organisations, such as Al Qaeda or Jemaah Islamiah, are expanding their activities internationally. The US, which sees their actions as a "challenge to civilisation," has responded with a "global war on terror."

Japan's response to this global war reveals a new trend in its security policies, i.e. Tokyo is raising its security profile through its participation in the war on terror. Japan's security profile has been limited for many years, disproportionate to its economic power, but the new global war is allowing such a situation to change.

Broadening International Role

It should be mentioned that Japan does not regard the activities of Islamic extremist organisations, including the September 11 attack, as posing serious threats to its national security. Unlike in Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern countries, the extremist organisations do not have strong bases in Japan from which to conduct their activities. Therefore, Japan's response to such terrorist acts has been to offer support to the US in its war against them.

Soon after the September 11 attack, Japan decided to send its maritime defence forces to the Indian Ocean, to provide rearguard support for the US-led military operation in Afghanistan. Since then, supply ships and destroyers have been dispatched regularly to the area, which is a remarkable development in Japan's security profile.

The mission in the Indian Ocean should be distinguished from international peace-keeping operations, in which Japan's Self-Defence Forces (SDF) have taken part in Cambodia, East Timor and other places. Such operations are carried out only after the end of military conflicts, and under the auspices of the United Nations. In contrast, the mission in the Indian Ocean is to provide direct support to one of the parties to the conflict. Such an activity by Japan is unprecedented since the end of the World War II.

This kind of response to the global war on terror serves two purposes. One is to contribute to the US-led efforts to crack down on international terrorist organisations. The other, and more

significant one, is to broaden Japan's role in international affairs. Tokyo's desire to broaden its international role grew out of the Gulf War in 1991. During that war, Japan's contribution had been limited to a financial role, for which it faced strong international criticism. Hence, when the world confronted the threat of terrorism with the September 11 attack, the Tokyo government sought to make a positive contribution to the international effort to combat it. Instead of being just an "ATM," Tokyo sought to be regarded as a responsible member of the world community by playing an active role.

The global war on terror has indeed facilitated Japan's broadening of its international role. Previously, due to historical reasons, it had been common for Japan to face opposition from neighbouring countries, in particular, Korea and China, when it attempted to broaden its security role. However, the terrorism issue provided a different situation to Japan. The war against terrorists is a global effort in which all the responsible members of the international community are expected to offer support, implicitly or explicitly. This makes it difficult for neighbouring countries to criticise Tokyo. Thus, when the Japanese lawmakers passed the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law in October 2001, which allowed the SDF to conduct activities overseas, neither Korea nor China raised strong objection to it.

Moreover, because it was for the "global war," this Law received strong support domestically. Various polls showed that the majority of Japanese supported their government's intention to dispatch the SDF to the Indian Ocean to lend support to the US activities. It is also notable that this Law was backed by many members of opposition parties. Previously, it was common for the ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to face criticism from domestic actors when it sought to enhance Japan's security role abroad. However, the terrorism issue provided a different environment, and made it easier for the LDP to promote its agenda.

Under the banner of the "war on terror" Japan is likely to continue the SDF's mission in the Indian Ocean for some time, as the latest defence white paper suggests. Although the SDF's long-term presence overseas could be a sensitive issue in the eyes of Japan's neighbours, the mission in the Indian Ocean could constitute a *fait accompli* in future debate.

Enhancing Domestic Security Systems

Issues of terrorism have another aspect in Japan. Although the main focus of today's global war is on Islamic extremist organisations, for Japan, North Korean issues are often addressed in terms of international terrorism. Many of Pyongyang's activities overlap with those of terrorists: intrusions by spy ships into Japanese territorial waters, various surreptitious activities in Japan and kidnappings of Japanese nationals. Tokyo's responses to these issues also result in the raising of its security profile. To begin with, Japan is enhancing its defence capabilities by providing its SDF with special operation troops. The maritime forces established what is called the Special Guard Team (SGT) in 2001, apparently in response to the continuous intrusions of spy ships. The SGT is modelled after the special unit, SEALs of the US Navy. In addition, the ground forces are enhancing their capabilities to deal with guerrilla activities by strengthening their special unit which conducts small-scale operations.

Moreover, Japan is updating its legal framework in the security area. Last June, the Diet passed a set of bills designed to deal with wartime situations, called the military contingency legislation. It is a significant step for facilitating the deployment of the SDF during security

contingencies. For example, the new bills make it easier for the government to commandeer private properties, including real estate, for operational purposes.

As Pyongyang is regarded as one of the so-called “rogue states” domestic consensus on these measures was reached relatively quickly and smoothly and the military contingency legislation was supported almost unanimously in the Diet. These domestic measures to deal with North Korean issues, which also result in the enhancement of Japan’s security profile, can be seen as part of Tokyo’s efforts to contribute to the global war against terror. While raising its security profile through its participation in the global war on terror and broadening its role in international affairs Japan is enhancing its defence capabilities and updating its security legislation.

Implications for Southeast Asian Politics

What implications does this trend have for Southeast Asian countries? Japan would like them to recognise that it is not seeking to project an offensive military posture or pursue intrusive security activities overseas. And that its intention is to become a responsible player in the international community as well as provide better security for its citizen in case of contingencies.

However Japan’s new security policies could, for historical reasons, become a source of concern for Southeast Asian countries unless efforts are made to remove mistrust, such as by promoting mutual understanding through dialogue and exchanges, including by military officers. In this regard Japan has designated the year 2003 as “ASEAN-Japan Exchange Year” to mark 30 years of Japanese cooperation with ASEAN. A symposium on Asian security is being jointly organised by a Japanese and Singaporean institute in Tokyo in October. It is in Japan’s interest to ensure that its new high profile in international security is not a stratagem to extend its military presence in Southeast Asia for purposes beyond the war on terror.

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