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Japan's Self-Defense Forces in Iraq: Motivations, Constraints, and Implications for U.S.-Japan Alliance Cooperation

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Summary

The capture and subsequent release of five Japanese civilians in two different hostage-taking situations by Islamic terrorist groups in Iraq in April 2004 underscored the high stakes for both the Japanese government of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and for the U.S.-led coalition. Except for the small Communist and Socialist parties, Japanese political leaders across the board supported Koizumi's adamant stance against responding to the hostage-takers' demands that Japan withdraw its contingent of some 550 troops that were deployed to Samawah, in southern Iraq, in early 2004. While this show of resolve by Japan has been welcomed by the Bush Administration, the longer-term effect of the hostage-taking and the upsurge in anti-coalition violence may reinforce the views of many in Japan, including the main opposition party, that agreeing to send Japanese troops to Iraq was a mistake. A number of Japanese commentators and political leaders have suggested that the government's main motive for sending troops was to strengthen U.S.-Japan alliance cooperation in the face of perceived security threats from North Korea and a rising China, not because of strong agreement with U.S. policy in Iraq. From this perspective, Tokyo's steadfastness could have a positive influence on other coalition governments who may now be reconsidering their commitments, while the withdrawal of Japanese forces, as many in Japan are demanding, could cause significant complications for the U.S. effort in Iraq and adversely affect broader U.S.-Japan alliance relations. This report will be updated as news events warrant.

Crisis Provoked by the Hostage Situation

The April 8, 2004 seizure of three Japanese civilian volunteers near the chaotic city of Fallujah, created the first major test of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's commitment to non-combat military participation in the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. The kidnapping in Fallujah, west of Baghdad, reportedly was carried out by a group calling itself the "*Saraya al-Mujahideen*" — translated as "Mujahideen Brigades." According to the *Al-Jazeera* Arab news service, the hostage-takers gave the Japanese government

three days to withdraw its troops or the hostages — two men and a woman — would be burnt alive. The two men, aged 18 and 32, were in Iraq as freelance journalists, while the woman, aged 34, reportedly had worked in an individual capacity for more than a year helping Iraqi street children and families who had taken shelter in abandoned houses. All three were described in the press as pacifists opposed to Japan's involvement in the war.¹

The hostage situation, the biggest challenge faced by Prime Minister Koizumi since he first took office on April 26, 2001, threw the government into a crisis mode. Koizumi and other senior officials immediately vowed not to give in to the terrorists demands. The main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), strongly supported Koizumi's stance despite its prior and ongoing opposition to the troop deployment. On April 11, 2004, the Japanese government dispatched a senior foreign ministry official and a special National Police Agency counter-terrorism team to Jordan to coordinate information gathering and cooperation with U.S. agencies and special operations forces on a possible rescue attempt.²

In the end, a rescue attempt proved unnecessary. On April 15, 2004, all three hostages were turned over to a moderate Sunni group, the Islamic Clerics Association, which had been negotiating their release, and which then arranged their transfer to the Japanese Embassy.³ The same day, two other Japanese, including a freelance journalist, reportedly were seized from a taxi near the scene of the downing of a U.S. Army helicopter outside of Fallujah. These hostages apparently were not threatened, and were released to the same clerical group and turned over to the Japanese embassy on April 17. For reasons that remain the subject of much comment in Japan, a section of the press, the political world — mainly in the ruling party — and the general public strongly criticized the former hostages for ignoring government calls for civilians to leave Iraq, jeopardizing the SDF mission in Iraq, and for having a leftist political agenda.⁴

Bush Administration Response

Senior Bush Administration officials expressed solidarity with Japan in regard to the hostages and U.S. officials in the region gave high priority to cooperation to gain the release of the hostages. Vice President Dick Cheney, who arrived on a previously scheduled visit Tokyo on April 10, in the course of a week-long trip to Japan, China and South Korea, reportedly gave top priority to urging Japan to continue with its commitment regardless of the outcome of the hostage situation. The Vice President reportedly reassured Japanese leaders that U.S. forces would make every effort to rescue the

¹ "Insurgents Holding Five Foreigners Hostage: Threatening to Burn Japanese Alive in Troop Ultimatum." *Associated Press Newswires*, April 8, 2004; "Relatives Pray for Hostages' Safety in Iraq." *The Daily Yomiuri* (Japanese national daily), Apr. 9, 2004.

² "Three Japanese Hostages in Iraq Released After Eight Days." Foreign Press Center/Japan, Apr. 16, 2004. [<http://www.fpcj.jp/e/shiryō/jb/0415.html>]

³ "Three Japanese Freed in Iraq, Just Hours After Italian Hostage Executed." *AFP*, Apr 15, 2004.

⁴ "Two freed captives, including Yasuda, arrive in Amman and likely to return to Japan tomorrow." *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Apr. 19, 2004; "Hounding of Returned Hostages Draws Fire Abroad." *Kyodo News*, Apr. 22, 2004.

hostages.⁵ Although this proved unnecessary, Japanese and U.S. officials reportedly had begun to prepare for a possible rescue attempt by U.S. forces.⁶

Background to Japan's Role in Iraq: The North Korea Factor

Concern about the near term threat posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons program and ballistic missiles, as well as longer term concern about a rising China, has had a major influence on how Japan views its broader alliance relations with the United States and its own international role, including its role in Iraq. The first indication of a shift in Japan's security outlook was apparent in the Koizumi government's unusually assertive support to the United States after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. Among its more important actions, the Koizumi government pushed controversial legislation through the Diet (parliament) that allowed Japan to send a small flotilla of the Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) into the Indian Ocean to provide fuel and water to U.S. and allied ships supporting operations in Afghanistan. This naval deployment, which was unprecedented since the end of World War II, marked a new chapter in U.S.-Japan alliance cooperation.⁷

Japan's vocal diplomatic support of U.S. policy toward Iraq before and during and after the U.S./U.K.-led invasion also represented sharp break with Tokyo's past reticence. During a highly contentious debate over two days in the U.N. Security Council in February 2003 involving more than 50 countries, Japan and Australia stood alone in their unequivocal support for a U.S. and British call for the adoption of a security council resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq.⁸ On December 9, 2003, despite the devastating bombing of the Italian police headquarters in Nasiriyah, in Southern Iraq, a few weeks earlier, and the ambush killing of two Japanese diplomats on December 1, the Koizumi cabinet adopted a "Basic Plan" for the deployment of up to 1,100 Japanese troops to Iraq. In late December 2003 and early 2004 Japan deployed its first contingents of some 550 troops to Iraq under significantly less constrained rules of engagement than previous Japanese international peacekeeping operations.⁹

While explaining his decision to send troops to Iraq in terms of Japan's international obligations, Prime Minister Koizumi has made clear that the North Korean threat and the

⁵ "U.S. Ready to Offer All-Out Cooperation on Hostage Crisis But Differs on Approach for Peaceful Solution." *Asahi Shimbun*, Apr. 12, 2004.

⁶ "U.S. May Have Mobilized FBI, CIA to Provide Information to Japan." *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, Apr. 17, 2004.

⁷ As of September 28, 2003, press reports based on Japanese government data indicated that Japanese supply ships had provided a total of some 322 million liters of fuel to U.S. Navy ships and those of ten other countries' navies free of charge. *Tokyo Shimbun*, Nov. 20, 2003.

⁸ "Nations Speak at U.N. Against Rush to War." *Associated Press (AP)*, Feb. 18, 2003.

⁹ "To Give Today Dispatch Order for ASDF's Advance Team; Plan for SDF Mission on Iraq Reconstruction Approved." *Sankei Shimbun* (national daily), Dec. 19, 2003: 1. (UPDATE)

longer term viability of the U.S.-Japan alliance have been uppermost in his thinking.¹⁰ In January 2004, after announcing that Japanese troops would be sent to Iraq, Koizumi told skeptical members of a parliamentary committee that “Japan cannot ensue its peace and safety by itself, and that’s why it has an alliance with the United States.” Denying that his government was abandoning Japan’s “U.N.-centered” foreign policy, Koizumi argued that in the event of a crisis involving Japanese security, “the U.N. will not deploy forces to fight with Japan and prevent an invasion.”¹¹ Some American and Japanese analysts also see Japan’s increased support of U.S. global and regional policies as carrying the implied expectation of reciprocity in the form of greater U.S. recognition of Japan’s interests and concerns regarding the Korean Peninsula.¹²

The most noteworthy aspect of Japan’s logistical support of U.S. and allied warships operating in the Indian Ocean and its later deployment of non-combat troops to Iraq is the extent that these actions stretched what previously had been regarded as clear constitutional constraints. Article 9 of Japan’s U.S.-imposed post-World War II “no-war constitution” renounces war and the right of belligerence. Under a long-standing finding by cabinet legal office, the constitution allows Japan to cooperate with the United States militarily for purposes of self-defense but bars participation in “collective defense” involving third countries. These constraints have been viewed widely in Japan as stretched to the limit by the deployment of ground troops to Iraq, especially because it could not rule out that the troops might come under fire by Iraqi insurgents. As a consequence, Japan’s main political parties and, according to polls, as much as 65% of the public now agree that the time has come to consider revising the constitution, regardless of their views on Japan’s role in Iraq. Koizumi has charged a committee of the LDP with drafting suggested revisions by the end of 2005.¹³

Japanese Response and Implications for Japan’s Future International Role and U.S.-Japan Alliance Cooperation

Despite the favorable outcome, the hostage incidents have had a significant impact on both the political and bureaucratic leadership in Japan, and on public opinion. The Japanese public, which generally did not favor sending troops to Iraq, nonetheless has appeared recently to be warming to Japan’s enlarged international role. In past hostage situations going back to the 1970s, Japanese policy often has appeared to be motivated primarily by the desire to save the lives of the hostages. In this case, however, editorials, press commentary, and statements by government officials indicated awareness that the country’s international standing and the U.S.-Japan alliance would be seriously damaged

¹⁰ Following the Cabinet’s action, Koizumi declared at a televised press conference that the time had passed when Japan could just “write checks” and “avoid making a human contribution because it’s dangerous.” Rather, he said, “What’s being tested is our ideals as a nation.” “Japan Postpones Iraq Deployment.” *BBC News*, Nov. 13, 2003.

¹¹ “Koizumi Cites U.S.-Japan Security Ties for Iraq War Support.” *Kyodo News*, Jan. 27, 2004.

¹² “Rumsfeld: SDF Forces ‘Safer’ in Southern Iraq.” *The Asahi Shimbun*, Nov. 12, 2003.

¹³ “Poll on Japan’s Constitution: Majority Wants Constitutional Change; Public Maintains Interest in SDF.” *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Apr. 2, 2004.

if the demands of the hostage-takers were met.¹⁴ According to polling data, more than 70% of the public — including some 88% of younger Japanese — supported this position.¹⁵

Nonetheless, the deterioration of the security situation in Iraq and the hostage-taking incidents appear generally to have undercut public and political support for the Koizumi's policy. Any further incidents of hostage-taking or serious attacks on the SDF troops could seriously weaken Prime Minister Koizumi's three-party coalition government. In addition to criticism from the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), a number of senior LDP politicians, including a former head of the Japan Defense Agency, also have expressed the view that it was a mistake to agree to join the U.S.-led coalition.¹⁶

For the Bush Administration, faced with the worst fighting since the fall of Bagdad in April 2003, and the withdrawal of forces by Spain, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic, Japan's strong stance has been important to stiffening the resolve of wavering coalition partners. The first contingent of Spain's 1,300 troops withdrew from Najaf while U.S. Marines were battling the Al-Mahdi Army of the militant Shia cleric, Muqtada-al-Sadr, for control of the city.¹⁷ Some other coalition partners reportedly have been considering withdrawing their forces or not replacing them when their current tour of duty ends.¹⁸

Questions remain about the Japanese government's staying power. A basic political weakness of the government's position is that the troops were sent on a humanitarian and reconstruction mission, and are explicitly forbidden to engage in combat except in self-defense. This also limits their value to the coalition. The sharp upsurge in violence has raised the possibility that Japanese troops could be drawn into combat for self-defense, which would jeopardize support for their mission. The acting secretary general of the LDP reportedly said in an April 18, 2004 talk show interview that the government would

¹⁴ The most egregious example occurred in 1997, when members of the Japan Red Army Faction, a radical leftist group in Japan, hijacked a Japan Airlines (JAL) plane in Dacca, Bangladesh, and demanded \$6 million and the release of their members from Japanese detention. The government of Prime Minister Fukuda eventually released the JRA members and paid an undetermined ransom. In 1978, after much domestic and international criticism, the government adopted a policy of not yielding to demands, but continued to favor approaches that gave first priority to protecting human life. "Japan's Past Stance on Hostage Crises." *Kyodo News*, Apr. 11, 2004.

¹⁵ "Radio Poll: 88% of Youths Support SDF's Continued Deployment in Iraq." *Sankei Shimbun*, April 11, 2004. Reportedly the poll was heavily skewed, with males strongly favoring keeping the troops in Iraq and females (only about one-fourth of the sample) strongly opposed.

¹⁶ "Two More Japanese Taken Hostage in Iraq As Frenchman Released." *AFP*, April 15, 2004; "LDP Losing Unity Over Iraq; Questions Raised About Japan's Support for U.S.; LDP Lawmakers Urge Gov't to Mull SDF Pullout; Tokyo Shimbun, April 15, 2004.

¹⁷ "Spaniards Complete Najaf Pullout, U.S. Forces Battle Militia." *EFE News Service*, April 27, 2004.

¹⁸ "Cracks Growing in U.S.-Led Coalition: Some Partners Deciding to Pull Troops from Iraq; Others Hint At Doing Same." *The Baltimore Sun*, Apr. 22, 2004. In a reverse of the growing doubts among some coalition governments, South Korea, which already has some 400 or so mainly engineering and medical troops in Iraq, has indicated that it is going ahead with plans to send 3,600 more troops to the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq. "ROK Survey Team Departs to Pick New Dispatch Site in Iraq April 9." *Seoul Yonhap* (news service) in English, Apr. 9, 2004.

have no choice to withdraw Japan's Self-Defense Forces from Iraq if they were to get involved in a firefight with Iraqi insurgents.¹⁹ On April 8, 2004, a day before the first hostages were seized, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda, a close ally of the Prime Minister, had indicated that in view of the rising violence, Japan was reviewing its longer-term options. "Conditions are changing, and we will respond to these as needed," Fukuda said. Meanwhile, he vowed that Japan would "carry on our rebuilding and humanitarian missions to the fullest possible limit."²⁰

Koizumi must lead his party in elections to the upper house of the Japanese Diet (parliament) in June 2004 under what may well be adverse circumstances. In lower house elections in November 2003, the LDP lost ten seats and just barely maintained its majority with the help of smaller parties, whereas the opposition DPJ gained 40 seats.²¹ The opposition DPJ has called for separating the issue of not yielding to blackmail from the larger question of the legality of putting troops in what it says cannot be described as a "non-combat" area, and the purposes served by Japanese forces in Iraq.²² In any event, the DPJ can be expected to make criticism of the Iraqi deployment a major theme its campaign for the Upper House elections this June.

Following the release of the hostages and a continued resurgence of economic growth, Koizumi's popularity rose sharply. In a mid-April 2004 poll conducted by a major national daily newspaper, some 73% of the respondents said that they wanted Koizumi to stay on at least for another year, and LDP candidates scored a clean sweep in three lower house bi-elections on April 26.²³ For a number of reasons, however, the LDP's prospects remain clouded. Koizumi's announcement on April 8 that he will not seek reelection after his current term ends in late 2006 may make it easier for him to make hard decisions, but will not necessarily help the LDP.

Concerns about Japan's security and the future of the U.S.-Japan alliance would appear to continue to give Japan a strong interest in maintaining its troops in Iraq. The Japanese Defense Agency already has announced that a replacement contingent of 460 troops was being readied for Iraq.²⁴ On the other hand, the deteriorating security situation in Iraq could still reverse Japanese policy, creating new problems for the Bush Administration and straining the U.S.-Japan alliance. Also, despite sending replacement troops there are no indications whether Japan will carry out its original intention to send up to 1,100 troops to Iraq. Japan's commitment to keeping its forces in Iraq could also weaken if the Koizumi government were to perceive that U.S. policy towards North Korea no longer was in accord with Japanese interests.

¹⁹ *Tokyo Shimbun*, Apr. 19, 2004.

²⁰ Linda Sieg, "Iraqi Fighting has U.S. Allies on Edge." *Reuters*, April 8, 2004.

²¹ See section on "Japanese Political Developments" [by Mark Manyin] in CRS Issue Brief IB97004, *Japan-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress* [(name redacted), Coordinator].

²² Japanese Parties Urge Separate Consideration of Hostage Crisis, Troops Issue. *BBC*, Apr. 9, 2004.

²³ "Japanese Voters Hand Koizumi's Party Solid Victory in Bielections." *Associated Press*, Apr. 25, 2004.

²⁴ "Defense Chief Orders 2nd GSDF Dispatch to Iraq." *Asahi Shimbun*, Apr. 28, 2004.

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