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THE LESSONS OF THE ASDF IRAQ MISSION

Ikuo Tohtake

Last December, Japan's Air Self-Defense Force completed its airlift mission to assist Iraq's reconstruction based on a law specially designed for the purpose. Over nearly five years since March 2004, the ASDF made a total of 821 flights ferrying supplies and personnel between Kuwait and Iraq. To someone who retired from the ASDF a week after the outbreak of the Iraq war and maintained strong interest in the airlift mission, the completion came as a relief. Despite the unexpected ruling in the midst of the mission by the Nagoya High Court,

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which said the ASDF's airlift activities were unconstitutional in light of the pacifist Constitution, the mission was carried through to the end with high praise from the countries involved. It also strengthened the Japan-US alliance and, above all, brought Japan experience and lessons concerning the operation of transport planes.

Ensuring Credibility Despite a Gap in Operational Framework

The ASDF has engaged in a series of overseas missions since the 1992 peacekeeping operation in Cambodia. Although it did fly six C-130 transports to Pakistan, an area where the war on terror was being waged nearby, in order to deliver relief supplies to Afghan refugees, the Iraq mission became a far more tension-filled operation. During the operation, ASDF members maintained constant visual vigilance, heard occasional missile launch warnings and took evasive action in airports and on flight paths, which were understood as the so-called "noncombatant zones."

The ASDF needed to explain to the other coalition members that it had to operate under a different framework from theirs because the special law prohibited the ASDF from transporting arms and ammunition. It deployed three C-130 transports in Kuwait and had one of them consistently in operation. The US and other forces initially requested that the ASDF operate all three C-130s, but the ASDF did not make a rash promise in light of its own standards of immediacy and security, and eventually succeeded in maintaining uninterrupted transport. The ASDF's maintenance of airplanes, discipline and morale were regarded the best among the coalition, which no doubt made a favorable impression on and earned the trust of the coalition forces, including the US.

The Japan-US Alliance and Intelligence

The Japan-US relationship, cultivated over long years for the defense of Japan, does not apply to the SDF's international peace cooperation activities, which were redefined as one of the SDF's primary missions in 2007. What is critical for a successful international operation is whether the two countries can share a mission.

We do not need to respond to all the criticism that Japan was blindly following the US but, as far as intelligence is concerned, the point is who has the necessary intelligence. Since Japan did not have intelligence-gathering capability in Iraq, it had to rely on the US, which possessed by far the highest intelligence-gathering capability among the coalition. Of course, the intelligence shared by the US, Britain and Australia – the countries fighting in Iraq – was different from the intelligence offered to the countries providing airlift assistance to the United Nations and coalition forces. The ASDF, which engaged only in the airlift mission, was not offered the other operational intelligence automatically. Therefore, to ensure the safety of transport even on routes normally considered safe, the ASDF had to busy itself with gathering intelligence on threats in the surrounding areas.

There were times when the provision of intelligence was interrupted. One was during the period when the Maritime SDF's refueling mission in the Indian Ocean was suspended, and the other was when the Ground SDF deployed to southern Iraq on a humanitarian mission was withdrawing. In the latter case, the US may have believed that the ASDF was withdrawing as well. These are clear examples of how difficult obtaining intelligence is even though equipment such as radios is readily available.

In any case, the airlift mission was best summarized in the following remarks made by the commanding officer, ASDF Col. Yasuji Kitamura. "I think our activities contributed to advancing Japan's national interests and strengthening the Japan-US alliance," he said during the flag return ceremony held in Japan after having carried out airlift activities almost perfectly throughout the five years.

Use of Weapons

The SDF accomplished the mission in an area filled with tension, having gained experience different from the previous peacekeeping missions. Compared with GSDF personnel, ASDF personnel may face far fewer occasions in which they are forced to use weapons. Nonetheless, Japan needs to consider whether allowing the use of weapons for strictly self-defense is a good idea in

terms of maintaining solidarity with its allies and other coalition members. Japan must establish rules on the use of weapons according to the type of mission when it considers preparing a general law on international peace cooperation.

Challenges Ahead

The SDF has received high praise from the international community for the activities of the Ground and Air SDFs based on the Iraq Assistance Special Measures Law and the MSDF's refueling activities based on the Antiterrorism Special Measures Law and the new law succeeding it. In January 2007, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told the North Atlantic Council that, with international peace cooperation activities having become one of the primary missions of the SDF, he would not shy away from overseas deployments of the SDF aimed at maintaining international peace and stability and conforming to the principles of the Constitution. In April of the same year, the government set up a Panel on the Reconstruction of the National Security Legal Foundation, and mainly examined cases concerning the right to collective self-defense. Three-fourths of the cases examined concerned the SDF's international operations, but no progress has been reported by the media since the panel's report was submitted to former Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda in June 2008. How will Japan respond to the situation in Afghanistan, which is the top concern of the Obama administration? In May 2008, the ruling coalition launched a project team to consider a permanent law authorizing SDF missions abroad, but the discussions have progressed very slowly to the point of the coalition appearing indifferent to the matter recently in line with the debate concerning constitutional revision. The Defense Agency was transformed into the Defense Ministry and international operations became a primary mission of the SDF in January 2007. Yet if the government does not learn lessons from the recent Iraq operation, there can be no development in future SDF missions abroad.

Finally, if I dare to comment on public relations, neither the ASDF's strenuous activities in the tension-filled environment nor the responses of the countries to which the ASDF was dispatched reached the Japanese public well, although this is partly due to the disadvantage of airlift activities, which are less

visible to local people than ground operations. I would also like to add that I heard that the completion of the ASDF mission in Iraq owed much to the support of Japanese diplomatic authorities and trading companies stationed in the region.



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