

JAPAN'S DISPATCH OF THE GROUND SELF DEFENSE FORCE TO IRAQ: LESSONS LEARNED

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Overview

- The Iraq deployment was a new experience for Japan's Ground Self Defense Force (GSDF) in that all previous missions for humanitarian aid and reconstruction had been carried out under a UN peacekeeping operations framework. The mission therefore provided the GSDF with an array of new challenges and learning opportunities.
- One of the major innovations for the Iraq deployment was the use of legal and political advisors from the Japan Defense Agency (JDA; recently renamed the Ministry of Defense) on the ground in Iraq with the GSDF. These advisors not only helped to improve coordination between the GSDF and other coalition forces, but also aided interagency coordination between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the JDA and the GSDF officers in Iraq.
- Interagency coordination between MOFA and the JDA was not always smooth, but most Japanese officials agree that the "two wheels of the cart" approach that they developed through daily consultations, whereby the GSDF represented the humanitarian face of Japan's support and MOFA represented the financial aspect through its dispersion of Official Development Assistance (ODA), was successful in carrying out the overall mission.

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- The GSDF had to overcome a number of issues in their interactions with Iraqi citizens, including high expectations regarding Japan's reconstruction efforts, poor communication, a lack of local intelligence and sometimes working around Japanese government-imposed restrictions to accomplish their mission.
- The Japanese government's handling of the media has been criticized for tightly limiting media access during the deployment, to such an extent that even GSDF officers on the ground would like to see more coverage of their reconstruction and humanitarian efforts in the future.

A New Kind of Operation

On December 9, 2003 the Japanese Diet passed the Humanitarian Relief and Iraqi Reconstruction Special Measures Law allowing the government to send the Self Defense Forces (SDF) to Iraq. Although some critics felt the dispatch violated Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, the Japanese government justified the operation through reference to UN resolutions 1483 and 1511 which sanctioned the contribution of humanitarian and reconstructive assistance to Iraq. The Ground Self Defense Force (GSDF) ordered its 2nd Division in Ashikawa, Hokkaido to begin selecting personnel to be dispatched, and the first troops arrived at the Dutch military base in Samawah on January 19, 2004. From that moment until their redeployment in June 2006, the GSDF and the entire Japanese foreign policy apparatus faced a number of unprecedented challenges in carrying out their mission to conduct medical support, water supply, and restoration and reconstruction of schools and other public facilities in the Iraqi province of Muthana.

Although the Iraq deployment was legitimized by the Japanese government under UN resolutions, the GSDF would carry out their mission within the "coalition of the willing" organized by the United States and without the type of UN guidelines that Japanese peacekeeping forces had previously operated under. This meant that the mission was much more open ended with less general guidance than the GSDF had been accustomed to in previous overseas deployments. Much of the planning had to be carried out on a day-to-day basis through liaison with the Iraqi public and coalition forces. Although this posed unique challenges, Japan gained valuable experience participating in a true multilateral operation for the first time, working closely with the Dutch, Australians and the British. Through discussions with its coalition partners Japan learned to integrate its diplomatic and military resources in a process that was quite different from previous UN organized deployments. The uniting principle among the various Japanese agencies and services involved was that the key issue was to complete the mission safely. Implications for the future role of the SDF were at stake.

Preparations

The GSDF made extensive preparations prior to dispatch. Major General Koichiro Bansho (then a Colonel) noted in an interview that of the 600 soldiers initially deployed to Iraq, only 50 of them had any previous overseas experience in peacekeeping missions.

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The Iraq dispatch would also be the first time in the postwar period that Japanese soldiers would be permitted to carry heavy weapons with them on an overseas mission. According to Bansho, "We fired off a years' worth of ammunition in two to three months of preparation." The GSDF dispatch was, however, under strict rules of engagement that did not allow the GSDF to use their weapons unless they or their coalition allies in their immediate vicinity were coming under fire. Bansho stated that he gave extensive training regarding those cases in which it would be permissible for the GSDF troops to open fire. Bansho also noted a feeling that the group was ill prepared for the type of culture shock they were about to experience. Training was therefore very demanding and included study of Iraq's customs, culture and religion. Troops were even encouraged to "go native" by growing facial hair. Limited language training in basic Arabic was provided for officers at the ranks of colonel and above.

Interaction with Coalition Forces

Shigeru Ishiba, Director-General of the Japanese Defense Agency (JDA) at the time of the Iraq dispatch, played a large role in coordinating the initial stages of the mission. Ishiba visited the Defense Minister of the Netherlands and the UK in order to smooth interaction between the SDF and other coalition forces in Samawah. During an interview Ishiba stated that intelligence sharing among the GSDF and other coalition forces was not perfect, but on the whole satisfactory. Ishiba felt that because the GSDF mission was different from that of other coalition forces, it was somewhat difficult to cooperate and coordinate with them to carry out the GSDF mission. Ishiba stated that if the mission had been to stabilize and secure the area it would have been easier, in that "it would have put the GSDF on an equal footing with the other coalition forces."

One of the lessons learned early in the deployment came through the GSDF's interaction with UK and Australian forces, which already had legal and political advisors on the ground when the GSDF arrived. Some inside the JDA had been hesitant to send advisors to Samawah, feeling that they might interfere with or get into conflict with the SDF officers on the ground. As it turned out, the process of getting JDA legal and political advisors into Samawah reportedly led to better discussions and coordination in Tokyo between the SDF and the JDA. Having JDA legal and political advisors accompany the GSDF in Iraq set a precedent which was then followed when Japan sent support troops into Pakistan following the 2005 earthquake.

Interagency Coordination: The "Two Wheels of the Cart" Approach

Legal and political officers from the JDA not only helped improve coordination between the GSDF troops on the ground and other coalition forces, they also proved useful in smoothing interagency coordination between GSDF officers and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) officials on the ground in Iraq. Inside of MOFA, the National Security Division of the Foreign Policy Bureau took the lead in planning for the mission. MOFA deployed five officials on the ground in Samawah on a monthly rotation out of Kuwait. These five MOFA officials hired their own security guards and initially kept their distance from the GSDF, staying inside the Dutch camp while the GSDF was building their own. Some of the MOFA officials had Arabic language capability that the GSDF

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officers lacked, the ministry having had developed an Arabic speaking program for career diplomats as far back as the 1960s following the Suez canal crisis.

GSDF officers interviewed indicated that there were some initial problems of rivalry between themselves and the MOFA officials, but that these differences were worked out during the day-to-day planning (which included the JDA legal and political officers) for activities undertaken in the early part of the deployment. This rivalry paralleled the one going on in Tokyo, where, according to former JDA Director-General Ishiba, the major disagreements were over Official Development Assistance (ODA) disbursements (primarily whether to provide more or less of these). The Cabinet Bureau helped to coordinate between the JDA and MOFA in creating what became affectionately known as the “two wheels of the cart” approach, whereby the GSDF represented the humanitarian face of Japan’s support through reconstruction activities in water purification, road building and medical supply and MOFA represented the financial aspect through its dispersion of ODA. Over time the JDA advisors, SDF officers and MOFA officials in Samawah got to know each other fairly well (despite the monthly rotations of the MOFA officials) and were able to coordinate their efforts on the ground, even when there was discontent in Tokyo. The ODA program for Iraq was split into two types. MOFA provided grass roots grants for the local government in the Samawah area that was synchronized with GSDF reconstruction priorities. Larger ODA grants for major construction projects were channeled through the central Iraqi government.

Boots on the Ground: Interacting with the Iraqi People

The Iraq mission differed from previous GSDF reconstruction efforts in that the infrastructure in Samawah was already more highly developed than in places such as Cambodia, where the basic construction skills of the GSDF engineering corps (for building bridges and roads, etc.) had been sufficient. Samawah required more sophisticated construction skills, which demanded that the GSDF contract out work to local civilian firms. This in turn allowed the GSDF to contribute more to the local economy by employing more Iraqi citizens, which helped to maintain good relations with the public and enhance security for the GSDF and other coalition forces in the area. The need for more advanced construction techniques motivated the JDA to dispatch two civilian specialists in engineering and construction from the Defense Facilities Administration Agency late in 2004.

In Samawah liaison with the local Iraqi people was the key to security for the GSDF. Understanding that the local Iraqi people were composed of several different tribes, each with its own separate interests, was crucial in this respect. Japanese mid-level officers I talked to were convinced that some tribal leaders had used mortar and rocket fire near the camp as a bargaining tool to gain a larger share of the assistance projects. One such incident occurred in April 2004, when a number of explosions outside the GSDF camp led Japan’s opposition parties to question the notion that the Japanese troops had been deployed in a “noncombat zone.” This caused the GSDF to quickly review its own activity in an attempt to discover what could be making a specific tribe angry and whether or not a certain tribe was receiving its fair share of assistance.

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Some tribal leaders were offered trips to Japan aimed at promoting better relations. Those that were not given these trips, however, tended to be resentful. To gain local intelligence Japanese officers paid visits to tribal leaders and met with leaders of the Dutch and other coalition forces to gain information about likely trouble spots. For the GSDF, the appearance of partiality to certain groups was hard to avoid in the beginning. By getting good intelligence from the local government and other coalition forces, the GSDF was able to eventually placate the disparate groups. The key to maintaining the peace and stability was the employment of a great many local Iraqi contractors to carry out the various reconstruction projects. Japanese authorities estimate that Japanese assistance, including repair work on public facilities by the GSDF and Japanese ODA projects under MOFA, created up to 6000 job opportunities a day, and a total of 1.56 million job opportunities.

In addition to the local intelligence problem the GSDF faced several other critical problems in completing their mission. Among these were the high expectations of the Iraqi people toward Japan. In July 2004 Japan's Kyodo News reported that the top official of the governing council of Iraq's Muthana province, Ahmed Marzoq, had stated that the assistance received from the Japanese SDF "is significantly below our expectations." Iraqi expectations for the construction of sophisticated new facilities such as electrical power stations and water purification plants simply required more resources and skills than the GSDF group had to offer. Japan's desire to deliver more to the Iraqis led to the aforementioned "two wheels of the cart" approach, with MOFA financing large-scale construction projects such as an electrical power plant.

Another reason for some of the early disappointment with Japan's reconstruction efforts was the limitation imposed by the Japanese government on the GSDF's objective. Because the mission was defined as reconstruction, the GSDF troops were prohibited from initiating large construction projects. This required the forces on the ground to sometimes indulge in creative interpretations of the rules, such as adding one water tank to an existing purification plant in order to classify their aid as reconstruction rather than simply construction, which could only be handled under MOFA's ODA program.

Communication was another obstacle. The GSDF, unlike MOFA, lacked Arabic speakers. There had been some limited training prior to dispatch only for higher-ranking officers. The GSDF therefore used English to interact with Iraqi interpreters. Among the deployed GSDF troops were only about 10 fluent English speakers. Some officers also worried that if they needed to communicate with Dutch forces (which provided security during the early phases of the GSDF deployment) via radio during an emergency there could have been misunderstandings leading to further problems. With the use of translators the GSDF was able to publish pamphlets monthly in Arabic to promote Japanese reconstruction efforts and also utilize local television stations to broadcast announcements with the same message. The lesson learned in this area was that the SDF needs more flexibility in its recruiting process to bring in a wider array of knowledge and skills. Some officers mentioned the possibility of employing civilians with

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knowledge of the local languages and the languages of coalition partners (such as the Dutch) in the future.

Media Issues

On Jan. 9, 2004 the JDA issued a request for Japanese media restraint on the deployment of the GSDF to Iraq. Director-General Ishiba summoned representatives of major news organizations and asked that they not report the details of the scheduled movements of GSDF personnel and other matters that might affect the safety of the troops and other Japanese nationals. The media organizations were further asked to exercise restraint in sending correspondents to Iraq or to the city of Samawah. This launched a somewhat combative relationship between the government and the media that continued throughout the deployment. Although Japanese news organizations were originally divided along ideological lines over whether or not to support the dispatch of the GSDF to Iraq, interviews conducted with reporters from the Yomiuri, Sankei, Asahi and NHK news organizations all contained a common theme of disappointment with the government's handling of the media in Iraq. None of the reporters I talked to felt that the government's attempt to restrict the media from reporting locally in the Samawah area was justified, either for the sake of troop safety or the safety of the journalists themselves. Despite the fact that two Japanese reporters were abducted and killed near Baghdad in late May of 2004, all of the reporters I talked with stated that reporters from the U.S. and other coalition countries faced the same dangers that Japanese reporters had to deal with and nevertheless did their job of keeping the public informed. Some reporters felt that the government did not want close scrutiny of the reconstruction projects, indicating that a lack of supervision over some of these reconstruction projects had led to waste and corruption. Some reporters questioned whether the facilities, such as a large electric power station, will hold up over time.

While officials at JDA and MOFA felt the restrictions on local media coverage in Samawah were justified under the circumstances, GSDF officers would like to have seen more coverage of their daily efforts in Iraq. GSDF officers took great pride in their achievements in Samawah and felt that it was a great opportunity for the Japanese public to gain a more positive image of the GSDF by observing it carry out its mission of humanitarian aid under hazardous conditions. How the Japanese government will handle the media in similar cases in the future is uncertain.

Conclusion

When the order for the redeployment of the GSDF out of Iraq came in June 2006, all of the major news organizations carried editorials highlighting the operation's achievements: the GSDF had not suffered any casualties, had not used force themselves, and had contributed to the reconstruction and stabilization of public life in the Samawah area. The perceived success of the Iraq deployment created a favorable domestic political environment for the recent passage of a new law that has raised peacekeeping operations to a central priority of the SDF on par with the defense of Japan. This should not be interpreted, however, to mean that Japan will become involved in every future international peacekeeping opportunity. According to Ishiba, even the limited role that the GSDF played in Iraq's reconstruction required a total effort

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by the Japanese government. Success in carrying out this limited mission in Iraq does not guarantee the same result in the future. Participation in further peacekeeping operations will require that Japan develop new systems for dispatching and maintaining troops in the field, new training programs and more flexible recruitment. To this end a training unit for international missions was established in March 2007 at the GSDF's Camp Komakado in Gotenba, Shizuoka Prefecture. The new training unit will educate GSDF members on international law and on regulations governing the use of weapons. The GSDF will also establish a 700-member rapid response regiment this year for future overseas missions. There is, however, still no permanent law governing overseas SDF missions outside of UN peacekeeping operations. In the meantime, each of these missions will require a new law.

Beyond the legal dimension, Japan's policymakers must find ways to institutionalize the lessons learned from the Iraq dispatch with regard to working with coalition partners, coordinating the interagency process, and gaining the cooperation of local populations if future operations are to succeed. With the Japanese Defense Agency recently upgraded to the Ministry of Defense, the head of that ministry will now be an equal of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It will therefore be especially crucial to the success of future overseas operations that coordination between these two ministries be streamlined. Hopefully the "two wheels of the cart" approach adopted during the Iraq dispatch will have laid the groundwork for this type of coordination in the future.