

Japan's Changing Civil-Military Relations: From Containment to Re-engagement?

By Takako Hikotani

Japan's relationship to its post-WWII past and the role of its military has always been problematic, domestically and internationally.

Japanese academic Takako Hikotani looks at the significant changes underway in Japan that are reshaping the interaction between political leaders and the country's Self Defense Forces.

FOR THE PAST TWO YEARS, Japan's Ministry of Defense has been mired in controversy, from the arrest of the administrative vice minister to recent inflammatory remarks made by an Air Self Defense Force general. All of this has happened while the Self Defense Forces (SDF) have steadily expanded their activities abroad — to Iraq, the Indian Ocean and now to the Sea of Aden. Does this mean that there is a serious crisis of civil-military relations in Japan?

THE PARADOX OF POST-WAR JAPANESE CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Post-war Japanese civil-military relations have been characterized by a paradox: civilian fear of the military has led to more vulnerability vis-à-vis the military. Restrictive measures to contain the Self Defense Forces by putting them under various “brakes” relieved political leaders from the cumbersome job of controlling the military. The civilian bureaucracy was in charge of “patrolling” the SDF, while the opposition parties and the media were the “fire alarms,” periodically calling attention to any actions that went beyond the “brakes.” Thus, an “auto-pilot” system of civilian control emerged that was designed to restrict the SDF and prevent the rise of militarism not to ensure that civilian preferences prevailed in decisions over the use of the SDF.

The obvious reason for the emergence of such a system lies in Japan's history. The pre-WWII experience of allowing the military to hijack the country led to disastrous consequences for Japan and the region as a whole. This memory still haunts the Japanese public and led naturally to a desire to constrain the role of the military.

However, history alone does not explain why such thinking prevailed for such a long time. It persisted because it was perfectly rational for politicians to maintain such a system, given the minimal policy and electoral costs. The perceived predictability of the Cold War solidified an enduring national consensus on three points: limited military power under constitutional restrictions, the bilateral alliance with the United States and prosperity through economic growth. The relative stability of this environment enabled the Japanese public and politicians to pay little attention to whether and how the SDF was providing security. While the public image of the SDF was generally positive during this period, with an approval rating of around 70 percent, the military was recognized mostly for its disaster relief activities, not as an essential provider of national security. In other words, the Cold War made it safe for politicians to rely on the “brakes” and the bureaucracy to control the SDF, because the actual use of the SDF for defense purposes was considered unlikely.

The Japanese electoral system further accelerated this tendency. The single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system, in which two or more people from the same party compete in the same district, minimized broad-based electoral issues and encouraged a focus on more narrow issues. Hence, individual legislators found dealing with defense issues relatively costly in terms of time and effort. It was also considered unwise and possibly suicidal for politicians in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to be viewed as hawkish, given the perception that the public was pacifist. Thus, the LDP introduced a series of preemptive controls, or “trip wires,” that set the boundaries of defense policy, including the ban on sending SDF units into combat abroad, denial of the right of collective self-defense, political constraints on defense spending, a ban on arms exports and the three non-nuclear principles.

These control mechanisms allowed politicians to exercise control of the SDF almost cost-free. Interestingly, however, the *institutions* of control turned out to be self-binding for the politicians themselves. In the short term, they actually increased the political cost of taking a pro-active

stance toward controlling the military. In the long term, the reliance on bureaucrats to enforce the restrictions led to a loss of leverage by politicians over bureaucrats and the SDF in terms of expertise, and created bureaucratic inertia to maintain the status quo.

Another long term, paradoxical consequence was that the SDF, while frustrated by the constraints, came to enjoy a certain level of freedom within those limits. Since the SDF was too sensitive to be politicized, the institution became almost invisible, especially in urban areas where there are no SDF installations. The SDF was widely discussed among academics as an abstract concept, but there was very little active policy discussion over who they are, what they do and how they think. As a result, the SDF became relatively autonomous in areas where military expertise is important — especially procurement, personnel (recruitment and promotion), education and training. The resulting paradox: containing the SDF made politicians potentially more vulnerable to the SDF in the long term.

FROM CONTAINMENT TO ENGAGEMENT?

However bad the economy was in the 1990s, this was certainly not a “lost decade” for Japanese civil-military relations. Instead, it was a decade of forced adjustment, both externally and internally. First, the end of the Cold War created a political cost for the “auto pilot” system of controlling the military. The experience of the first Gulf War, in which Japan was widely criticized for exercising “check book” diplomacy in place of military assistance, made Japanese politicians acutely aware of the importance of political leadership over the military, and the need to include military options as a form of international contribution. In other words, politicians became aware of the price they paid for their relative inattention to military matters.

At the same time, electoral reforms in 1993 changed the political cost-calculations of individual politicians. With the replacement of the SNTV system with a combination of a single-member system and proportional representation, policy differences between parties, including over defense issues, became more important.

Thus, there is now an electoral incentive to be able to converse intelligently on defense matters. Furthermore, a series of administrative reforms strengthened the power of the cabinet secretariat vis-à-vis other ministries and enhanced the institutional foundations for political leadership.

A series of legislative measures adopted in the 1990s also relaxed the “brakes” on the SDF. The UN Peacekeeping Operations legislation in 1992, revision of international disaster relief legislation in 1994, redefinition of the US-Japan alliance and the Law Concerning Measures to Enhance the Peace and Security of Japan in Situations in Areas Surrounding Japan (SASJ Law) opened the way for dispatching troops abroad. Then the 2003 Emergency Situation Law for the defense of Japan clarified the SDF roles and missions for domestic contingencies. While Japan’s pacifist constitution remains important as a template, the political debate is gradually shifting from whether the SDF can or cannot be allowed to engage in a certain mission to whether or not the SDF should or should not be dispatched, and how the Diet should be involved, with the opposition party demanding a detailed prior approval process in the Diet.

Changes have also occurred at the bureaucratic level, not so much as a result of upgrading the Japan Defense Agency to the Ministry of Defense (MOD), but by a series of reforms, led by former Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba, which are to be implemented in the next several years. The series of scandals in 2007, including the arrest of the administrative vice minister (the ministry’s top civilian position), intelligence breaches, false reporting in the chain of command during the Indian Ocean refueling operation and an accident between an Aegis-class warship and a fishing boat called into question the effectiveness of the SDF and whether it can be held accountable. After a thorough review by a government commission consisting of ex-bureaucrats, retired generals and academics, a plan for organizational reform of the Ministry of Defense was laid out. Most importantly, it was deemed counterproductive to try to contain the SDF as a means of control. Instead, the commission proposed engaging

the military in the policy process. While this is unlikely to occur overnight, the role of civilian bureaucrats is expected to change. No longer are they to be surrogates acting on behalf of politicians, but instead they are to support the defense minister side by side with SDF officers.

Finally, the SDF became highly visible during this period. Their actions during the Kobe earthquake in 1995 and their role in peacekeeping operations in Cambodia were generally portrayed positively in the media. The most important event, however, seems to be the humanitarian and reconstruction activities in Iraq from 2003 to 2006, which, due to relatively frequent rotations, involved troops from all over Japan, and did not result in any casualties. Through extensive media coverage of its activities, the SDF was no longer an abstract concept, but people with faces.

ENTER THE GENERAL:

THE TAMOGAMI INCIDENT

It was against this backdrop that the Air SDF Chief of Staff Toshio Tamogami was dismissed last October, after his essay, “Was Japan an Aggressor Nation?” was published after it won first prize in an essay contest sponsored by a real estate development company whose president is known for his right-wing views. In the essay, Tamogami argued that it is a “false accusation that our country was an aggressor nation,” and that Japan was “caught in Roosevelt’s trap and carried out the attack on Pearl Harbor.” He also argued that the SDF is “bound hand and foot and immobilized,” because Japan is hobbled by a belief, arising out of the Tokyo war crimes trials, that “if the Japanese army becomes stronger, it will certainly go on a rampage and invade other countries, so we need to make it as difficult as possible for the SDF to act.”

Although such views are common among right-wing pundits, Tamogami’s essay sent shock waves through the public and political establishment. Because he was no ordinary airman, but the chief of staff of the ASDF the incident reinforced stereotypes and fears about the military. Moreover, most people had never met or even heard an SDF officer speak up. Tamogami has become more vo-

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cal since his forced retirement, and now openly calls for constitutional revision, claiming that “99 percent” of SDF officers share his views.

The most important outcome of this incident is that Tamogami was immediately forced to retire. Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada accused him of expressing views that are “significantly different from the government’s current position on Japan’s wartime history,” and Prime Minister Taro Aso called Tamogami’s statements “extremely inappropriate given his position.” These reactions show that the political leadership did not hesitate to enforce civilian control over the military. However, uneasiness over future civil-military relations remains, especially concerns about why Tamogami came to believe that his statements were appropriate, and whether Tamogami’s opinions really are shared by the officer corps, as he claims.

It appears that Tamogami may have misread the political climate in two ways. First, he may have misunderstood suggestions by Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Taro Aso that right-wing nationalist views have become mainstream, not recognizing that it was surely more important that neither Abe nor Aso visited the Yasukuni Shrine while in office. He also seems to have misread former Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba’s calls for uniformed officers to “speak up,” which obviously meant to encourage involvement in policy making, not to challenge the government’s

position or the constitution. (Ishiba has openly criticized Tamogami’s actions, and Tamogami has responded by calling him a “traitor.”)

The more disturbing question is whether Tamogami’s views resonate deeply with SDF officers. The results of an SDF officer opinion survey that I conducted in 2003 with Hitoshi Kawano at the National Defense Academy shed some light on this question. With a sample size of 900 officers, the survey participants ranged from officer candidates to colonels. The questionnaire was modeled on the Civil-Military Gap survey conducted in the United States by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS), led by political scientists Peter Feaver and Richard Kohn. An additional 100 civilian elites consisting of randomly selected University of Tokyo Faculty of Law graduates were included in the survey, and some questions asked in a government-conducted general population survey were included to enable civil-military comparisons.

The survey results showed that SDF officers are confident and somewhat conservative; they support the US-Japan alliance but not necessarily unconditionally. They are sensitive to combat casualties, and understand civilian control but are eager to be more involved in policy making. Some 75 percent of officers believe that the general public has a positive image of the SDF, but many believe that there is a culture gap between civilians and the military. However, there seem to be some differences over how to address the perceived gap. While overall, 58 percent believe that the SDF could be a role model for society, 64 percent think the SDF should interact more with civilians and introduce the values and customs of society at large into the military. Since younger officers tend to agree more with the latter view, we may expect a closing of the civil-military gap in the future. (Of course, this will not happen if the difference in opinion comes not from a generational difference but from the number of years of service in the SDF.)

As for the alliance with the US, the gap between the civilian elite and the general public was greater than the gap between the civilian elite and SDF officers, with the latter being more positive. The

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same can be said about attitudes towards sending troops to UN peacekeeping operations. What is interesting to note is that a “request from the US” does not rank very high among the criteria for deciding to send troops, compared with “humanitarian needs” and “national interest.” Another interesting result is that officers showed an aversion to casualties, with more than 50 percent responding that “less than 100 deaths are acceptable” in the case of situations in areas surrounding Japan. This stands in contrast to the results of the 1998-99 TISS survey, in which 83 percent of US officers responded that “more than 500 casualties are acceptable” for defending South Korea, while 52 percent cited the same figure for defending Taiwan.

As for issues of civilian control, more than 70 percent in our survey believed that “officers should not criticize government or society at large,” but 74 percent believed that “officers have insufficient influence in foreign policy decision making.” While it is important to note that 76 percent of the civilian elite agreed with the latter point, still there are signs of a desire for more civilian control.

The above results show that Tamogami may have been correct to suggest that it is wrong to assume that the SDF was eager to “go on a rampage and invade other countries.” However, more importantly, it shows that he was wrong to imply that the general public, in fact, held such a view, and that officers felt that society was against them. The survey also shows that most officers would have considered his actions inappropriate, although they might share his desire to have more say in policy making.

CHALLENGES IN THE FUTURE

Are civil-military relations in Japan in a state of crisis? Does the Tamogami incident suggest that we should once again try to “contain” the SDF? While the incident has led to reviews of the curriculum at SDF schools, the Ministry of Defense’s reforms are taking place as planned, leading to more engagement, not containment. The greatest lesson of the incident should be that it was precisely because of a lack of engagement that such misguided views emerged. Therefore, efforts to “put the vipers back in the box” would be counterproductive.

If policy decisions are made to release the “brakes” on the military, politicians need to realize that life may have been easier with the brakes on because they provided a comfortable formula for military policy. If a permanent law to dispatch SDF troops abroad is to be passed, when, how, and to what extent the Diet should be involved in such decisions has to be determined. Procedurally, the strength of the Upper House needs to be taken into account, and there needs to be a public discussion of how democratic accountability and operational effectiveness should be balanced in making decisions. It is especially important to be aware that there may not be self-evident reasons of national interest to dispatch or not to dispatch troops, and so decision making might be difficult.

The biggest challenge in the future is that the SDF will likely face a non-LDP government at some point. While this already happened in the 1990s, the experience was rather brief. The survey showed that officers were socially conservative, and may have a natural sympathy for the LDP as their “guardians” against the opposition during the Cold War. This feeling might be mutual, especially among hawkish LDP party members. Still, it would be a good wake-up call for politicians in both parties and the general public: they, not pre-imposed brakes or bureaucrats, are in charge of exercising civilian control over the SDF.

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