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The End of Alliance “Business as Usual”? Ozawa’s Rejection of Japan’s Indian Ocean Deployment (Indonesian translation available [here](#))

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The defeat of the ruling Liberal Democratic party-led coalition by the Democratic Party of Japan in Japan’s Upper House elections on July 29 has already sent shock waves through the US-Japan security alliance. Surprising many who saw only his bullying style and right wing policies, DPJ leader Ozawa Ichiro moved quickly to set the DPJ on a course deeply antagonistic to US hopes for Japan as a global military partner.

The opposition used its new parliamentary dominance in the House of Councillors immediately after securing election victory in four telling ways. First the DPJ and its House of Councillors coalition partners appointed long-standing liberal social democrat Eda Satsuki as President of the upper house - the first non-LDP president in half a century - giving the DPJ the power to control proceedings in the chamber for the first time. [1] The second move was to notify the LDP that it would require prior Parliamentary approval of all overseas deployments, rather than the present comfortable requirement of confirmation after the fact. [2] The third was to give notice that the DPJ was opposed to any extension of the Air Self Defence Force deployment in Iraq, and was considering introducing a bill to end the deployment. [3] The fourth was to give notice to both the LDP and the United States that the party was opposed to any extension of the long-running Maritime Self Defence Force deployment in the Indian Ocean beyond the expiry of the current legislative authority on November 1st under the 2001 Special Antiterrorism Measures Law. [4]

It says a great deal about the deep penetration of the Japan-US alliance structure into Japanese domestic politics that Ozawa’s most salient and vociferous public critic was not the Japanese prime minister but the US ambassador in Tokyo, Thomas Schieffer. Ozawa and Schieffer share a reputation for blunt hectoring styles of intimidation. Following reports that the DPJ was considering opposing a fourth extension of the Indian Ocean deployment, Schieffer stridently and publicly demanded DPJ support. Schieffer came to Japan following a controversial posting as representative of the Bush administration in Australia, where he had gained a reputation for highly visible overbearing interventions in Australian political life. After Ozawa’s announcement that the DPJ was considering opposing another extension of the MSDF mission, Schieffer met with Ozawa, proclaiming the question of Afghanistan an issue which “should be above partisan politics”. Schieffer then insisted that Ozawa was wrong to maintain that Afghanistan was an American war without UN sanction, in particular arguing that the operation is covered by UN Security Council Resolution 1746 (2007) passed on 23 March this year.[5]

The apparent effect of Schieffer’s public attack on the Japanese opposition leader was not only to strengthen Ozawa’s resolve on the Indian Ocean deployment, but to broaden the argument to the point of a rejection of participation in US coalition global operations.

“Our interpretation of the Constitution is that the right to self-defense is made only when Japan is attacked,” Ozawa said in the open-door meeting with Schieffer in Tokyo. “If I am in the position of decision-making, unfortunately I don’t think we’ll be able to participate in the operations led by the United States.”[6]

The Nikkei noted that

“the ambassador, appearing slightly agitated by Ozawa’s remarks that U.S. President George W. Bush launched the ‘American war’ on Afghanistan without waiting for international consensus, reminded the opposition leader that “90 percent of the oil Japan uses comes through this area subject to terrorists’ and that Japanese nationals also died in the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.”

Two days later in a meeting with Foreign Minister Aso, Schieffer’s assessment of the consequences of Ozawa’s irresponsibility had expanded, since he now considered the maintenance of the Indian Ocean coalition “so important to the security of not only the United States and Japan but to the whole world.” [7] In the meeting with Schieffer, held with the press present, the pugnacious and generally somewhat nationalist Ozawa expressed views shared by many of the now marginalised conservative doves in the LDP he once directed. Ozawa reiterated his view that the war in Afghanistan was a war in America’s interests started by the United States without United Nations authorization. Japan, argued Ozawa, should participate in UN-sanctioned peacekeeping, but should not cooperate in what he presented as an American war.

Whether or not Ozawa will maintain this position in the face of American pressure and internal party disagreement, and the degree to which this stance is only a negotiating tool to batter the flailing Abe administration on the one hand, and push the United States towards taking Japan less for granted, is yet to be seen. Post-war parliamentary oppositions in Japan have usually folded when push comes to shove, and Ozawa has important pro-American critics in his party, such as his predecessor Maehara Seiji. But Ozawa has placed the question of the real role of the Indian Ocean deployment on the public agenda in a way it has not been in the past six years. Whatever his ultimate goal may be Ozawa has raised the strong possibility that by not renewing authority for the small ASDF deployment in southern Iraq, Japan will join the increasingly long list of former US coalition partners in Iraq.

Reflecting the deep psychological structure of alliance dependence characteristic of American allies such as Japan and Australia, one media criticism of Ozawa’s move was that by not immediately acceding to US demands, Japan would run the risk of “isolating itself.”[8] A Nikkei editorial feared that “such a development could also harm Japan’s alliance with the U.S.”[9] The risk of “isolation” is to be overcome by over-performance of “global responsibilities”, a senior MSDF officer told the Yomiuri:

“I believe that our mission is a passport into the international community in its continuing fight against terrorism.” [10]

Most importantly, the LDP’s election defeat and Ozawa’s high profile attack on the MSDF Indian Ocean deployment have delivered a fatal blow to the US campaign to push the LDP to deploy air and ground troops to Afghanistan. For at least the past year, the United States and NATO have been calling for an increased Japanese military commitment to Afghanistan. The US and the NATO hardline members on Afghanistan have called with increasing asperity on other NATO countries for more troops on the ground in the losing fight in Afghanistan, with fewer restrictions on their use in combat. Japan, like Australia, is regarded by NATO and the US as a key “non-NATO partner country” [11], and Prime Minister Abe indicated that closer cooperation with NATO in Afghanistan was one of his goals.[12] At the same time as the Afghan Vice President visited Tokyo in June, and called for further Japanese assistance including an increased SDF role, a senior US defense official was pressing the LDP to commit ground forces to Afghanistan.[13]

The Japanese security establishment, the US ambassador and the mainstream media all assailed Ozawa’s move as a threat to coalition solidarity over Afghanistan as part of the “war on terror”. An unnamed senior Defense Ministry official told the Yomiuri: “Afghanistan is a hub for international terrorist groups. If efforts to rebuild the country fail, all the world will continue to be scared by threats of terrorism.”[14] The Nikkei scolded the DPJ: “the Diet’s refusal to extend this legislation would call into question Japan’s commitment to the international fight against terrorism.”[15] At the same time as the possibility of a US invasion of Waziristan was being debated, Thomas Schieffer lectured Ozawa at their meeting that taking the MSDF out of its Indian Ocean role, at a time when Pakistan’s navy has taken its turn in command of the coalition operation, would weaken Pakistan’s commitment to the coalition cause.

"It is very important to keep Pakistan, the only Muslim country in this coalition, in the coalition because that sends a strong message to everyone in the Middle East that the war on terror is not a war on Muslims." [16]

The United States clearly sees Ozawa's shift as a serious threat to its capacity to maintain a coherent coalition presence in Afghanistan. The Japanese presence is important politically rather than militarily. In March 2007 the supply ship Hamana set off for its Indian ocean station for the sixth time escorted by the newly commissioned 5,000 ton Takanami-class destroyer Suzunami (DDH 114). [17] While these deployments over the past six years have been useful to the MSDF in its quest for coalition experience in distant ocean operations, actual demands on the refuelling operation have diminished in recent years.[18] The Japanese material contribution could easily be replaced.

For the United States, the loss of a possible recruit to the ground war in Afghanistan is more threatening. The Iraq war has been effectively written off, but the demands of the equally serious but less questioned war in Afghanistan are escalating. When US U.S. deputy undersecretary of defense for Asia and Pacific security affairs James Shinn pressed former LDP vice-president Tamasaki Taku over further SDF deployments in the Afghanistan theatre, Tamasaki warned him:

"It's very difficult. It will take a great deal just to have the special antiterrorism measures law extended at the extraordinary Diet session to be held this fall." [19]

Clearly Tamasaki was right in his reading of the Japanese political landscape, and equally clearly the US was not prepared to take "no" for an answer.

That it should be Ozawa Ichiro who led the most important challenge to US presumption to direct Japanese security policy may surprise many. But perhaps this was due to a misunderstanding of the full ramifications of Ozawa's well-known championing of the rightwing nationalist agenda slogan of Japan becoming "a normal country". The process of remilitarisation is the best known consequence of the success story of that agenda: the effective abandonment of half a century of "defensive defense" and its replacement with a policy of military preparedness commensurate to perceived threat, the normalisation of overseas deployment of the SDF, and the move towards "great power realism" and closer integration into US global military planning.[20]

The nationalist agenda always had the restoration of full Japanese sovereignty as one of its goals: hence it is hardly surprising that Ozawa should be so sharp about US unilateralism and its presumption that Japan will automatically follow the US. Ozawa did not dismiss the possibility of collaboration with the US against terrorism, but only from a position of "a bond of equals" [21] – not a term that could ever have been applied to the Apmo alliance relationship at any time in its half century history.

But perhaps most importantly in the long run for both Japanese democracy and for the possibility of Japan taking its place in global politics "as a normal country" without further militarisation, either within the alliance or beyond it, is Ozawa's other longstanding demand for Japan: that Japanese elected representatives, both as legislators and ministers, take full and proper responsibility for their decisions. For too long, Ozawa has argued, Japanese politicians have been prepared to allow unelected senior officials to wield power over policy while elected politicians simply looked on, providing electoral legitimacy but not taking responsibility. [22] Foreign policy and security policy are prime examples, and Ozawa's use of the DPJ's new upper house power is a case of practising exactly what he has preached.

The results are already visible. Ozawa's attack on Middle East policy in terms of "alliance business as usual" undoubtedly has many motives and may well not be sustained. But for the first time he has positioned the parliamentary opposition to hold the government to account, and forced the US to move from behind the scenes pressure to direct public intervention, and put paid to any US hopes of a Japanese military contribution to the war in Afghanistan.

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Notes

- [1] [With New Upper House Majority, Ozawa Steps Up Attacks On Govt](#), NikkeiNet, 8 August 2007.
- [2] [Ruling Parties To Accept DPJ's Demand On Troop Deployment](#), NikkeiNet, 7 August 2007.
- [3] [Ozawa To Mull Submitting Bill To Cancel SDF Dispatch To Iraq](#), NikkeiNet, 7 August 2007.
- [4] [Ozawa To Mull Submitting Bill To Cancel SDF Dispatch To Iraq](#), NikkeiNet, 7 August 2007.
- [5] [UN Security Council Resolution 1746](#) (2007).
- [6] [DPJ Rejects Schieffer's Request To Extend Antiterrorism Operations](#), NikkeiNet, August 8, 2007.
- [7] [Japan, U.S. Conclude Pact On Protecting Shared Military Info](#), NikkeiNet, 10 August 2007.
- [8] For example, Hidemichi Katsumata, "[MSDF Mission Key for Japan/ Reinvigorated opposition shouldn't hinder antiterror law extension](#)", Daily Yomiuri Online, 7 August 2007: "If Japan departs from this circle now, it will isolate itself in the international community."
- [9] "[Editorial: Newly Powerful DPJ Must Avoid Partisan Gamesmanship](#)", NikkeiNet, August 8, 2007.
- [10] Hidemichi Katsumata, "[MSDF Mission Key for Japan/ Reinvigorated opposition shouldn't hinder antiterror law extension](#)", Daily Yomiuri Online, 7 August 2007.
- [11] Masako Ikegami, [NATO and Japan: Strengthening Asian stability](#), NATO Review, Summer 2007.
- [12] "[Japan and NATO: Toward Further Collaboration](#)", Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the North Atlantic Council, 12 January 2007.
- [13] [Incoming U.S. official hopes Japan will dispatch SDF to Afghanistan](#), Afghanistan News Center, June 29, 2007 (Kyodo).
- [14] Hidemichi Katsumata, MSDF Mission Key for Japan, Yomiuri, August 7, 2007.
- [15] "Editorial: [Newly Powerful DPJ Must Avoid Partisan Gamesmanship](#)", NikkeiNet, August 8, 2007.
- [16] [Japan's DPJ Won't Back Extension of Anti-Terror Law, Ozawa Says](#), Keiichi Yamamura and Stuart Biggs, Bloomberg, 8 August 2007.
- [17] The best systematic coverage of the MSDF deployment chronology and composition is "Jieitai Indoyo haken (Dispatch of SDF to the Indian Ocean) at Wikipedia (Japanese)
- [18] Richard Tanter, [The MSDF Indian Ocean deployment - blue water militarization in a "normal country"](#), Japan Focus, May 15, 2006
- [19] [Incoming U.S. official hopes Japan will dispatch SDF to Afghanistan](#), Afghanistan News Center, June 29, 2007 (Kyodo).
- [20] Richard Tanter, "[With Eyes Wide Shut: Japan, Heisei Militarization and the Bush Doctrine](#)" in Melvin Gurtov and Peter Van Ness (eds.), [Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Critical Views from the Asia-Pacific](#), (New York: Routledge, 2005) , and Richard Tanter, [About face: Japan's remilitarisation](#), CLSA Asia-Pacific Markets, Tokyo, November 2006.
- [21] [DPJ's Ozawa Talks Tough In Meeting With U.S. Envoy Schieffer](#), NikkeiNet, 9 August 2007.
- [22] See for example Ozawa Ichiro, [Nihon kaizo keikaku \(Plan for Japan's Reconstruction\)](#) (Tokyo: Kodansha,1993).