

Bush and Koizumi

By *Sasaki Takeshi*

THAT five Japanese citizens* were taken hostage by armed militants in Iraq and the withdrawal of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) was brought forth as a condition for their release proved a shock to the Koizumi Cabinet. The five hostages were released unharmed and the Koizumi leadership, to its good fortune, came out of the crisis with political gains. However, due to the continued worsening of security in Iraq, the debate regarding the dispatch of the SDF troops has not diminished but, on the contrary, it is just now becoming a political issue, at the very moment that the pullouts of the troops like those of Spain are commencing.

The dispatch of the SDF troops to Samawah in Iraq can be interpreted as one consequence of the history of post-Cold War Japan-U.S. relations. First of all, the Japanese leadership has come under the sway of a kind of paranoia resulting from its experiences during the crisis and conflict of the Persian Gulf War. Japan's leaders became conscious of the cool reception of the U.S. government regarding Japan's economic support in the war of 1990-1991 but never reaching the point of actually sending troops. Since then, they have been obsessed with the notion that this cannot be repeated again. This paranoia was directed solely at Japan's relations with the United States and was not based primarily on its Middle East policy centered on such issues as the procurement of oil resources. As a result, there was very little debate concerning the degree to which the Koizumi Cabinet sympathized with or concurred with the Bush administration's Iraq policies and political decisions. All that was brought forth for debate was whether the Constitution recognized the dispatch of the troops to areas of conflict, and based on the decision that Samawah was not such an area, the dispatch was settled on as a means of assisting the reconstruction of Iraq.

Secondly, as a result of the abrupt appearance during the past few years of

suspicious that North Korea possesses nuclear weapons, and the increase of military tensions in the region, the U.S. military commitment to the security of Japan has become much keener than before. Like Iraq, North Korea falls within the Bush administration's definition of "rogue nations," and Japan's cooperation with the United States in Iraq is seen in Japan as inseparable from the expectations and tacit agreements between the two nations regarding North Korea.

An assessment that the war in Iraq is a war against international terrorism is not totally absent in Japan, but in comparison with Spain, for example, the circumstances are fundamentally different because of the issues surrounding North Korea. In response to the hostage issue, the Japanese government swiftly declared that the withdrawal of the SDF units was entirely out of the question and Japan had no intention of giving in to terrorist threats. But rather than indicating that the Japanese government had a strong tenacity of purpose in standing up to terrorists, this response should probably be seen as an expression of concern vis-à-vis the American administration, with the North Korean problem in mind. Here again, factors such as the actual circumstances in Iraq and the pros and cons of the Bush administration's policy for Iraq have been pushed into the background, and there has been no leeway for dealing with the kinds of political decisions that other nations have faced regarding conditions in Iraq. To sum up, the fact that the SDF remains in Iraq is a means of ensuring America's commitment on the North Korean issue.

Thirdly, the favorable personal relationship between George W. Bush and Koizumi Junichiro is playing an important role in bolstering the relationship between Japan and the United States. To be sure, the relationship between the two is said to be the closest between the leaders of the respective nations since the days of the late Ronald Reagan and Nakasone

Yasuhiro, but there are few interpretations that this is based on political conversations or mature deliberations. Nonetheless, as a result of this relationship, the political destinies of the two leaders have become tightly interlocked. If Bush's management of the Iraq problem turns out to be unsatisfactory, Koizumi will not be able to avoid the political fallout.

The Bush administration is confirming that it has not reneged on plans to transfer sovereignty to the Iraqi people at the end of June. Immediately following this deadline, Japan will hold House of Councilors election in July. The bombings in Spain are still fresh in everyone's mind, and there is talk everywhere about the possibility of a terrorist attack in Japan as well. As a matter of course, the Koizumi Cabinet is taking extreme caution that the dispatch of the SDF members to Iraq would become a point of debate in these elections. However, the scheduled events of June and July could well become factors leading to major difficulties for the Koizumi Cabinet.

If the scenario of the Bush administration's transfer of power is not fully realized and if in fact the situation returns to actual warfare once again, and especially if security in Samawah – where the SDF is stationed – should deteriorate significantly and that region should become a danger zone such that the Dutch troops, who are currently in charge of maintaining peace and security in the same region, would withdraw, this would prove a true nightmare for Koizumi. A withdrawal of the troops of the various nations, which were dispatched in order to maintain public security, has widely been discussed. The sphere of action for the SDF, whose role is not peacekeeping but assistance in the recovery of the nation and whose role can only be carried out under the condition that the area is not dangerous, is originally quite limited. If the area of open conflict should expand to include the areas in and near which the SDF is

*Note : On April 7, three Japanese citizens were taken hostage in Iraq on their way to Falluja. The hostages were two volunteer workers, Takato Naoko and Imai Noriaki, and a photojournalist, Koriyama Soichiro. Two other Japanese, a humanitarian worker, Watanabe Nobutaka, and a freelance journalist, Yasuda Junpei, were reported missing on April 14.

active, it would become necessary to halt those activities. That, in turn, would lead to a questioning of the initial purpose for sending the SDF to Iraq in the first place.

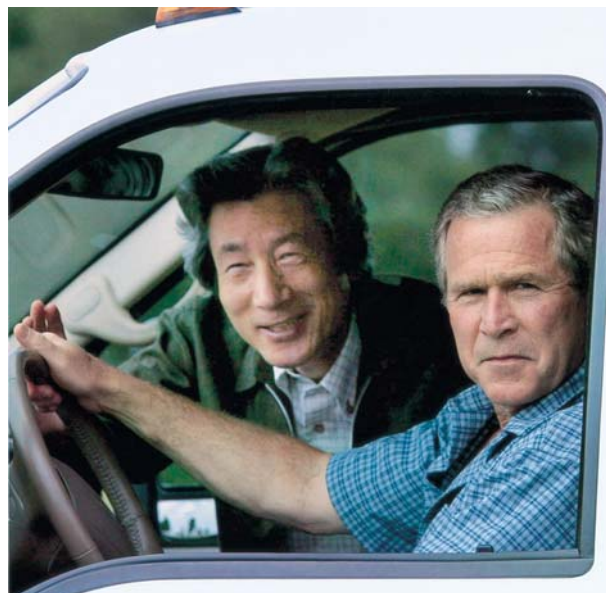
As indicated above, it appears that from the beginning, the Koizumi Cabinet did not possess the political will to make its own decisions regarding the state of affairs in Iraq, or to initiate action based on the circumstances there. The government is leaving all of those decisions up to the Bush administration. The fact is that as far as the Koizumi Cabinet is concerned, the dispatch of the SDF units was the objective, and it would have to be added that all other political considerations were given only secondary consideration. The best scenario would be if the Bush administration did not make major mistakes in its decisions and if the SDF were able to establish a specific record of support in Iraq's reconstruction. But if the decisions of the Bush administration fail, the Koizumi administration would face a major risk that it did not consider at the beginning. The worst case scenario would be if, out of political concern for American sentiment, the SDF could not pull out, and if, due to the deterioration of security, it could not successfully carry out its activities in supporting reconstruction. In actuality, the possibility of the optimum scenario seems to be fading.

It is already being reported that there are movements within the governments of the related nations to consider a withdrawal from Iraq, with the end of June as one potential date. There is no indication that the Koizumi Cabinet might be contemplating the same thing. The spell cast by the previously mentioned paranoia has considerable potency. For the Bush administration, a withdrawal from Iraq prior to the November presidential election is inconceivable. Even if Bush were to lose the election, a complete about-face in policy would be rather difficult to implement. Assuming that the Koizumi Cabinet survives the July election, and as long as he adheres to the policy of giving top priority to consideration for the U.S. attitudes, the SDF – as living evidence of the diplomatic circumstances – will remain cornered, unable to pursue

its role yet unable to withdraw. As a result, there may be casualties in the SDF as well. Koizumi apparently intends to keep the troops in Iraq even after Iraq regains sovereignty, but Japan's pro-American stance alone does not necessarily mean that one can hope for a positive turn of events in the situation in Iraq. The essence of the issue is whether the Bush administration's political decisions are appropriate or not, and one can say that however solicitous Koizumi is of the Americans, it will have virtually no effect on the general situation in Iraq.

A truly large number of arguments have been raised for defending the necessity of the dispatch of the SDF to Iraq. That is not a difficult thing to do, however. Actually, Japan's history in the 1930s is not lacking precedents in this matter. But the truly troublesome issue lies in the careful deliberation of when and on what grounds a withdrawal should be implemented. Conversely, by coming to grips with this issue, the true meaning of the dispatch is thrown into relief for the very first time. As I have said, the position the Koizumi Cabinet took in dealing with this difficult subject was insufficient from the outset. That is, decisions concerning this issue were left up to the Bush administration and the American people, and on that basis, it was simply a matter of pouring all the cabinet's energies into cooperating with the United States. Within these limitations, the Bush-Koizumi alliance is extremely asymmetrical politically, but at the same time it is firm and there is no uneasiness about it dissolving. It is not too much to say that at present there are no preparations in the Koizumi Cabinet for taking the kind of action that the administration of Rodriguez Zapatero did in Spain.

However, this firm alliance is based on



Bush and Koizumi in Crawford, Texas

political decisions that, at least in the context of the past year, cannot be said to be entirely appropriate. There is a paradoxical element here in that this firm alliance has a brittle basis. Both Bush and Koizumi are recently displaying an interest in arguments for the replacement of a primarily Anglo-American-supported rule of Iraq by one led by the United Nations. But the historical realities of the past year and the issue of the political responsibility for giving birth to that reality is of grave importance, and it is probably not permissible to simply return to the past. It is becoming steadily less probable that Koizumi will be able to face the House of Councilors' election without being confronted with the issue of this historical reality and the political responsibility for it. **JS**

Editorial Note: Since this article was written, the situation in Iraq has worsened. Samawah had been regarded as relatively less dangerous, but this is no longer the case as can be seen by the sporadic rebellions against the U.S.-led occupation forces. Two Japanese journalists were killed in a suburb of Baghdad on May 27. In view of such circumstances, the SDF's humanitarian activities have been restricted to their compound area. Meanwhile, the second core unit of the Ground SDF has now replaced the first one. It is reported that the Koizumi Cabinet intends to have the SDF participate in a multinational peacekeeping force to continue its humanitarian activities in Iraq.

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