



Elite Japanese Troops Stretch Constitutional Limits

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Summary

Japan inaugurated a 300-member elite counterterrorism force March 29 and announced that an advisory group to redefine its basic defense strategy soon will be formed. Japan also has raised security at transportation nodes and warned of possible terrorism attacks. Despite these efforts, the country remains a soft target for attacks. Tokyo will continue to restructure its military forces, with terrorism serving as only the latest in a series of issues that counteract long-standing opposition to removing the war-renouncing elements from the country's constitution.

Analysis

Japan initiated a 300-member Special Operations Group on March 29, an elite counterterrorism force based east of Tokyo in Funabashi City. The new counterterrorism force will be trained in urban warfare, close-quarter combat and intelligence gathering and will be available for deployment anywhere in Japan. The new unit comes online just days after Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi warned the Japanese that terrorism could happen anywhere in the world, including Japan.

Tokyo's newfound focus on counterterrorism serves two purposes. First, as Japan enhances its security alliance with the United States, it is finding itself in the crosshairs of al Qaeda. But in the longer run, counterterrorism -- like anti-guerrilla operations -- serves as a convenient explanation for the need to restructure Japan's armed forces and remove long-standing constitutional constraints.

On the same day the counterterrorism force was established, Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda announced the imminent formation of an advisory body on the revision of Japan's basic defense plan. The plan, adopted in 1976, was revised in 1995 after the end of the Cold War significantly changed Japan's strategic outlook. Key parts of the next generation of revisions envisioned by Koizumi include counterterrorism preparations, prevention of nuclear and missile proliferation and streamlining Japan's military.

Japan has a large and modern military, although it is called the Self-Defense Force to avoid offending semantic sensibilities. Much of the current force structure was based on backing up the United States in the event of a war with the Soviet Union, although there have been more recent modifications to focus more on smaller local threats such as North Korea. Koizumi wants to downsize the number of heavy weapons such as tanks and restructure the military as a leaner, more technologically savvy fighting force.

The current focus on terrorism serves as another way to frame the discussion of military restructuring and as a justification for revision of the constitution to allow collective defense and a more proactive role in global security. Half a decade ago, there was a similar push for military change, based on the threat of North Korean missile launches and guerrilla infiltrations. Those concerns elicited significant early changes in the way the Self-Defense Forces communicated and cooperated with the different branches of the military and with the police and Coast Guard, and initiated a series of cross-training exercises to better integrate the disparate defense and security forces.

With the public focus on North Korea slipping and the issue of terrorism on the rise following the

Sept. 11 attacks, Tokyo has once again shifted gears to play off a looming threat, thereby accelerating military reform.

Although the threat of a North Korean missile strike might have been low and the threat of North Korean guerrilla infiltration only slightly higher, Japan faces a much more serious threat of terrorism from al Qaeda or affiliated groups.

Japan has been mentioned specifically on the short list of potential targets by al Qaeda; before Sept. 11, there was a warning of potential Islamist terrorist attacks in Japan and South Korea, although these turned out to be misdirection by al Qaeda. Japan remains a relatively soft target, with extremely dense populations, U.S. military facilities and plenty of mass transit.

There is a ready pool of potential militants in Japan' s large immigrant workforce, many of whom come from Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia, where al Qaeda and the regional Jemaah Islamiyah militant groups operate and recruit. As of just a few years ago, for example, there were 145,000 registered Filipinos in Japan, with more than 80,000 entering on visas each year. Even if they were not recruited as attackers, they still provide easy cover. Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, a top al Qaeda leader, spent several months in Japan in 1987 learning rock-drilling operations.

Japan' s subway was attacked by a local militant cult, Aum Sinriko, in 1995, and Japanese and U.S. military facilities come under monthly attack by suspected leftists firing homemade mortars. None of the attackers in the mortar cases have been found, and the apparent ease with which they operate raises serious concerns about the possible damage should a more competent set of attackers strike.

Although Japan is increasing security at airports and major train stations, officials admit there is little that can be done to prevent attacks on the rail lines. Intelligence sharing remains far below what it should be, according to Defense Agency chief Shigeru Ishiba, who recently called for a system to identify and analyze valuable information from across the range of security and government agencies and deliver it to the prime minister. As Tokyo continues to increase involvement with the United States abroad -- the last of Japan' s 550 ground troops arrived in Iraq on March 27 -- its profile as a potential target will rise proportionally.

But this is a risk Tokyo is willing to take to secure a new, more proactive role in global security -- and the security of its own economic and energy interests abroad. This requires more than a simple reinterpretation of the country' s constitution -- it requires a complete overhaul. With the threat of terrorism ripe, the impetus will continue to be for change rather than for stagnation and retrenchment.

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