

UPDATE

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SHOULD THE U.S. BE PRESSING JAPAN TO SEND TROOPS ABROAD?

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As 200,000 American troops mass on the Kuwaiti border, the Persian Gulf crisis already has sparked open warfare in the Japanese Diet. The reason: Japanese Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu's controversial proposal to send a "Peace Cooperation Corps" to Saudi Arabia to support the United States-led Multi-National Force. Linked to the proposal is the survival of Kaifu's government and, perhaps, long-term Japanese support for the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Kaifu's plan is to create a 2,000-strong unarmed corps that would enable Japan for the first time to support United Nations and multi-national peace-keeping operations. This corps would be drawn from Japan's Self-Defense Force for non-combat support roles under the command of the Prime Minister.

This proposal has become tangled in a divisive political gridlock that has delayed an adequate Tokyo response to the Gulf crisis. Immediately after Iraq's August 2 invasion of Kuwait, Japan quickly voiced its support of Washington's opposition to Saddam Hussein's aggression. Then, predictably, Japanese efforts stalled. Only after nearly four weeks of heavy American pressure did Tokyo make public its plans for a support package. Included in this package were unspecified amounts of loans and grants to Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey; the dispatch of up to 100 Japanese medical specialists to the Gulf; and the use of Japanese ships and airlines to transport supplies to the Middle East.

Vague Promises. Washington's criticism of Japan's paltry support package was swift and severe. While resource-poor Japan gets 60 percent of its oil from the Gulf states, it was correctly pointed out, Tokyo's promises of financial aid were vague and likely to be tied up in negotiations for months. Reacting to the U.S. pressure, Tokyo slowly began augmenting its support package. Financial contributions were boosted to \$4 billion, making Japan the largest donor after the U.S. About \$2 billion is intended to offset the transportation cost of U.S. deployments to Saudi Arabia. Japan also has donated such material support as televisions, video recorders, and nearly a thousand trucks and ambulances. Japan says that it will buy American-made trucks, construction equipment, and computers for U.S. forces.

Ultimately, in an effort to appease U.S. demands for more substantial and appropriate Japanese contributions to the Gulf crisis, Kaifu made his final offer: the unprecedented dispatch of a "Peace Cooperation Corps." This proposal immediately triggered an intense debate across Japan. All eight opposition parties, except for the moderate Democratic Socialist Party, condemned the proposal; then early this week, even the Democratic Socialists joined the chorus of opposition. Worse, Kaifu was abandoned by key factions within his own Liberal Democratic Party. As it now stands, the proposal cannot pass the opposition-controlled Upper House, and may not even get through the Lower House, where

the Liberal Democrats still have a majority. With a defeat of his proposal, Kaifu, whose public approval rating has dropped to around 45 percent, almost certainly would have to step down by year's end. Indeed, Kaifu's Liberal Democrat rivals already have begun jockeying for the top slot in anticipation of his downfall.

The message of the Peace Cooperation Corps defeat is clear: the Japanese public strongly opposes any overseas deployment of its Self-Defense Force. Opposition is not limited to within Japan. Voicing strong diplomatic protests have been China, the Koreas, and many Southeast Asian capitals. Indeed, aside from Kaifu and the U.S. government, support for the Corps is conspicuously lacking. The strong U.S. backing for the Kaifu plan may be unwise. Not only may the controversy hurt the pro-American Liberal Democratic Party in Japan's upcoming November by-elections, but perceived U.S. heavy-handedness well may lead Japanese politicians already irritated by the U.S. to increasing intransigence on other areas of concern to Washington, like trade. What's more, further strains on the U.S.-Japan defense alliance could complicate the long-term American military presence in Japan, which may become more important to U.S. global strategy if the U.S. leaves its air and naval bases in the Philippines.

Increased Japanese Role. Though deployment of a Peace Cooperation Corps is not currently appropriate, there are other things that Japan should do to support the multi-national operation in the Persian Gulf. Washington should press Japan to increase assistance for Egypt to help cover the costs of a prolonged Egyptian force deployment to Saudi Arabia. Tokyo publicly could promise to airlift additional U.S. troops and supplies to the Gulf should fighting erupt. With Washington's help, meanwhile, Japan gradually can begin participating in regional naval exercises with South Korea, the U.S., and Southeast Asian fleets over the next five years.

The Bush Administration deserves credit for pushing Japan toward responding to a military crisis in a manner unprecedented in Japan's post-World War II history. Now it is time, however, for Washington to pull back in the face of weak Japanese support for the Kaifu proposal. If not, Washington could alienate the Japanese public further, weaken the Liberal Democrats, and damage the U.S. defense alliance with Japan. Given the response inside Japan and across East and Southeast Asia, it is still too early to press Japan into deploying military forces far away from the Japanese islands.

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