The MSDF Indian Ocean deployment – blue water militarization in a “normal country”

Recommended Citation

"The MSDF Indian Ocean deployment – blue water militarization in a “normal country”", APSNet Policy Forum, March 30, 2006, https://nautilus.org/apsnet/0610a-tanter-html/

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Richard Tanter

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Essay - The MSDF Indian Ocean deployment - blue water militarization in a "normal country"
3. Nautilus invites your response

Introduction

Richard Tanter of the Nautilus Institute writes "there is a continual tendency in both Japan and abroad to underestimate Japan's actual military strength - especially that of its naval forces. Maritime Self Defense Force destroyers and refuelling supply ships have been continually on-station in the Indian Ocean since November 2001. The Indian Ocean deployments are well away from the public eye, and little is known in detail about them", and "the precise Rules of Engagement and legal framework under which the MSDF is operating in interdiction operations is not known, nor is the fate of those 'many crews' arrested".

This essay was first published in Japan Focus, issue 549.

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views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

Essay - The MSDF Indian Ocean deployment - blue water militarization in a "normal country"

Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force (MSDF) destroyers and refuelling supply ships have been continually on-station in the Indian Ocean since November 2001. The MSDF ships were dispatched under the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law (2001), which has since been extended a number of times beyond its original two year period of application. [1]

Deployments began with the dispatch of the supply ship Hamana (8,150 tons) and its destroyer escorts Kurama (DDH - Shirane-class, 4,400 tons) and Kirisame (DD - Murakame-class, 5,200 tons). The stated purpose of the contingent was to provide a Japanese re-fuelling capacity to the multinational forces operating in the Indian Ocean against Afghanistan following the U.S. attack prompted by the 9/11 bombing attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In December the following year, after considerable controversy inside the ruling party and cabinet, Aegis-air defence system-equipped Kongo-class destroyers were included amongst the escort vessels, ostensibly to meet the air defence needs of the supply ships. As of the beginning of 2006, the supply ship Tokiwa had been on station for a month, escorted by the same Kirisame.

Between 2001 and mid-2005, according to the recent Asahi Shinbun series on the MSDF deployments [2], forty seven MSDF ships have participated in thirteen rotations on station. By October 2005 MSDF supply ships had supplied 552 ships in the multinational force, dispensing fuel worth 155 hundred million yen. [3]

Rules of engagement

But the Japanese mission is not limited to supplying fuel. The Asahi makes clear that one part of the MSDF contingent's duties has been interception of vessels regarded as suspicious. The Asahi cites JDA statements about 11,000 inspections, and "many crews" arrested. [4] The Asahi comments wryly, "however, it is not clear how this work actually contains terrorists." In fact, a great deal is unclear about the Japanese activities in "Operation Enduring Freedom - Maritime Interdiction Operations (OEF-MIO)". The precise guidelines the MSDF is using are not known, though the Asahi refers to use of US guidelines concerning suspicious ships. The Asahi cites an example where the boarding of a ship was left to a Canadian navy ship, apparently authorised to do so where the MDSF was not. [5] Yet the precise Rules of Engagement and legal framework under which the MSDF is operating in these interdiction operations is not known, nor is the fate of those "many crews" arrested.

The question of the precise legal arrangements governing these interdiction operations in the Indian Ocean now overlaps with the issue of the legality of multinational operations to interdict alleged weapons of mass destruction under the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative, to which Japan is a party. The MSDF is an eager partner in this developing capacity, and Japan hosted one of the first PSI multilateral naval and coast guard exercises off the coast of Sagami Bay ("Team Samurai 04") in October 2004. [6] For the blue water interdiction ambitions of the MSDF, four years of practical experience in the Indian Ocean is invaluable.

Changes in the Indian Ocean deployment

As the Ground Self Defence Force commitment to Iraq winds down, there is no sign that this MSDF Indian Ocean deployment will be abandoned. However, during the past four years, the pattern of activity and the character of the deployment have gone through important changes. As the Asahi

notes below, the height of refuelling activities corresponded with the attack on Afghanistan itself, but the attack on Iraq led to another spike in supply work.

In 2005, the number of escort vessels was reduced from two to one, and most importantly in the November 2005 deployment, the supply ship was no longer accompanied by an Aegis-class destroyer. There were most likely two reasons for this, neither suggesting a scaling back of Japan's naval role in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf.

Firstly, in 2004 the Koizumi government committed Japan to rapid deployment of a theatre missile defence system in conjunction with the United States, the most potent part of which will be the sea-based system centred on Japan's four Aegis-class destroyers. All four Aegis-class ships - the Kirishima, Kongo, Myoko and Chokai - spent time on the Indian Ocean station, but all four are undergoing advanced Aegis training with the US Navy, in preparation for their new duties. [7]

Secondly, the primary reason for dispatching the Kongo-class Aegis ships in the first place was not, as was stated by the government at the time, air defense for the supply vessels. The smaller but still highly competent Shirane- and Murakame-class destroyers were more than capable of handling any conceivable local area ocean air defence. The real reasons are not completely clear, but undoubtedly have to do with the prodigious area-wide surveillance and tracking capacities of the Aegis air defence system operated by the Kongo-class ships . These would have enabled the MSDF ships to cooperate with both US and UK navy and air units operating not only in the Indian Ocean, but possibly over Afghanistan itself. The possibility has also been raised that they were used to provide air defence warning for the approaches to the giant US-base on Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago - a crucial and ongoing staging ground for both the war on Afghanistan and the war on Iraq.

More generally, the Indian Ocean deployment has been of enormous value to the MSDF itself, by providing a very large portion of the MSDF's ships and personnel with war zone experience. The MSDF thus gained practical experience of multilateral operations in theater, with all the trials of inter-operability, communications difficulties, differing rules of engagement, and differences in organisational culture.

"Inter-operability" - the capacity to work together with military forces of other nations, is clearly a technical requirement for any effective multinational force - whether under UN auspices or any other. The importance and difficulty of achieving this goal is clear from this Canadian navy discussion:

> "These obstacles are commonly grounded in such factors as disagreements or misunderstandings over mission goals, priorities and rules of engagement (ROEs); the reliance of different coalition contributors on different types of equipment, or on similar equipment with different specifications; the commitment of the various national forces involved to incompatible tactical, organizational, leadership or other professional doctrines; the involvement in coalition campaigns of units that have been exposed to unrealistic and/or insufficient training and preparatory exercises; and a variety of other factors, ranging from different organizational cultures to outright policy disagreements at the highest levels of national decision-making. Left unattended, such sources of behavioural divergence can create havoc in the field, particularly when many of the national contingents involved are not large enough to be logistically, and in other respects, self-sufficient." [8]

Almost immediately in 2001, the MSDF rapidly discovered how little prepared it was for large-scale operations far from home - and hence welcomed the opportunity for expansion of its capacities as a true "blue-water navy". While most attention has gone to the role of accompanying destroyers, the impact of the distant deployment experience is evident in the rapid development of larger supply vessels than were available in 2001, such as the newly launched 13,500 ton Mashu, deployed in November 2004, almost twice the size of its predecessors.

In addition to the MSDF deployments documented below, and the GSDF deployment of more than 600 troops on reconstruction duties in Samawa in the southern Iraqi province of Al Muthanna, there has also been a series of Air Self Defence Force deployments that have led to a constant ASDF presence, amounting to more than 264 transport flights as of February 22, 2005. [9]

The Indian Ocean deployment and Heisei militarization

In addition to their contribution to the multinational war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and their practical value for Japanese military forces, the Indian Ocean deployments also have important political roles both in Japan and abroad. Within Japan, they are Japan's most substantial - or at least most visibly substantial - contribution to international cooperation to restrain transnational terrorism. The Iraq ground forces deployment has been deeply mistrusted from the beginning, and the use of Aegis ships was much criticised when first announced. Pacifist opinion - both from the left and within conservative ruling party circles - recognised the potential jump in levels of practical cooperation with and integration into US distant water operations. Proponents of a stronger military-based defence - not solely located in strongly nationalist quarters - argued that the deployment was too late and too timid.

However, the Indian Ocean operations have received much less criticism. The Indian Ocean deployments are well away from the public eye, and little is known in detail about them. In contrast to the deeply politicised debate over the dispatch of SDF troops to Iraq, there was little public discussion and less criticism of the MSDF dispatch and its continued involvement in the region now in its fifth year. Neither scholars nor journalists have been effective in efforts to penetrate the veils surrounding the operations. [10]

But it is not just distance and absence of concrete information that explains the relative acceptance of this deployment. Much more than the Iraq deployment, the MSDF deployment can be presented as part of Japan's contribution to international cooperation against transnational terror, thus gaining the crucial legitimacy in Japan of association with legitimate United Nations-linked activities. The legislation under which the MSDF continues to operate in the Indian Ocean is the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, and is continually presented to the Japanese public in such terms. [11]

This "softening" of the otherwise all-too-apparent MSDF connection to US military activities is valuable for the Koizumi government's wider goals of accustoming the Japanese populace to the use of Japanese military forces abroad, especially in a multilateral context, as a means to strengthen the view that this is "normal" activity. This paves the way for both revision of Article 9 and public acceptance of development of effective capacity for overseas military power projection.

The real military capacities of the SDF as a whole have been steadily and effectively expanded over the past decade and a half, in a process I have described as Heisei militarization. [12] Especially in the past five years, through changes in law, foreign policy and security high level doctrine, operational guidelines for cooperation with US forces, SDF rules of engagement, force structure, and military planning, Japan has removed many of the pre-existing restraints on the use of its already materially extremely powerful military forces.

Some of these shifts were underway in the 1990s, especially in the implementation of the 1997 Japan-US Mutual Security Treaty Guidelines, but much more followed in a rush of legislative, organisational, and doctrinal changes precipitated by the 9.11 attacks. US concern to reposition Japan within US global strategy coincided with the desire of the dominant elites in the LDP, Foreign Ministry and Defence Agency to push away both the domestic and foreign restrictions on Japan becoming a "normal state" status. This process of Heisei militarization, driven by both US pressure and domestic elite preferences culminated in the two momentous decisions of 2003-4 to deploy a theater missile defence system, whatever the consequences may be for relations with China, and to deploy ground troops in Iraq.

There is a continual tendency in both Japan and abroad to underestimate Japan's actual military strength - especially that of its naval forces. The MSDF in 2006 had 16 submarines and 54 principal surface combatants (destroyers and frigates), and 109 Lockheed Orion P-3C antisubmarine warfare aircraft in various modes. [13] The United States apart, no naval force operating in Northeast Asian waters can come close to equalling the MSDF in surface vessels, submarines or maritime aerial surveillance capacity. While Russia in its Pacific fleet and China have numerically superior surface and submarine forces, a large proportion of these ships and submarines are inoperable at sea for more than a few days a year, or are obsolete by comparison with their MSDF opposite numbers. [14] The Indian Ocean MSDF deployments, which, like the ASDF deployment [15], are set to continue after the withdrawal of ground troops from Iraq, represent a crucial advance in the process of Heisei millitarization.

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Other policy forums by Richard Tanter:

- Securitising the Australia-Japan relationship: Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum: 07-07A 15 March 2007
- Ten questions about East Timor for which we need answers: Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum 06-18A 8 June 2006

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Endnotes

[1] See Gavan McCormack, " Japan's Afghan adventure", Japan in the World, November 5, 2001. http://www.iwanami.co.jp/jpworld/text/Afghanexpedition01.html

[2] See Asahi Shinbun, ""Japan's New Blue Water Navy: A Four-year Indian Ocean mission recasts the Constitution and the US-Japan alliance", ", Japan Focus, 2006. http://www.japanfocus.org/article.asp?id=550

[3] The supply statistics are set out in Kaijou Bokuryou Kanbu, Hokyuu yusou kyouryoku shien

katsudou nado no jisseki ni tsuite, H17 (2005) .12.6. http://www.jda.go.jp/JMSDF/about/haken/hakenkyouryoku/sienkatudou/index.html The Indian Ocean rotations are set out in detail in Kantei no shutsunyuu minato kiroku, H17(2005).12.6, http://www.jda.go.jp/JMSDF/about/haken/hakenkyouryoku/kantei/index.html and in "Jieitai Indoyou Haken", Wikipedia - Japanese edition, (accessed, 24.2.2006). http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki

[4] See also Ministry of Foreign Affairs, " Achievement of Operation Enduring Freedom-Maritime Interdiction Operation (OEF-MIO)", October 2005. http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/terrorism/effort0510.html#2

[5] A Canadian Naval Task Group similar in composition and size to the MSDF contingent was deployed in the Arabian Sea in November 2001, and is still on station under the code name of Operation Apollo. See " Canada's Military Contribution To The International Campaign Against Terrorism", http://www.navy.forces.gc.ca/mspa_operations/operations_e.asp?x=1&id=5 and " Canada's Naval Task Group Arrives In Arabian Sea", CJTFSWA 01-01 - November 23, 2001. http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/newsroom/view_news_e.asp?id=294 There is a detailed and useful account of the Canadian Marine Interdiction Operations in United States Central Command, Canada. http://www.austin2600.org/mirrors/leaflets/www.centcom.mil/Operations/Coalition/Coalition_pages/canada.htm

[6] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) Maritime Interdiction Exercise "Team Samurai 04" (Overview and Evaluation), October 28, 2004. http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/disarmament/arms/psi/overview0410.html

[7] See "Commands we train", Center for Surface Combat Systems detachment, Yokosuka, US Navy. http://www.yoko.atrc.navy.mil/commands.htm

[8] Danford W. Middlemiss and Denis Stairs, "The Canadian Forces and the Doctrine of Interoperability: The Issues", Policy Matters/Enjeux Publics, June 2002, Vol. 3, No. 7. http://www.irpp.org/pm/archive/pmvol3no7.pdf [PDF]

[9] For data on ASDF Middle East operations to February 2006 see ASDF, Iraku fukkou shien haken yusou koukuutai ni yoru yusou katsudou jisseki". http://www.jda.go.jp/jasdf/iraq/jisseki.htm For ASDF contingent rotations see ASDF, Iraku fukkou shien haken yusou koukuutai. http://www.jda.go.jp/jasdf/iraq/iraq_contents.htm

[10] This is evident when writing on the MSDF deployments is compared with the work of activist-researchers such as Peace Depot's Umebayashi Hiromichi, whose creative use of the US Freedom of Information Law has made it possible to document important new understandings of the US Aegis-class missile defence patrols in the Sea of Japan. See his "Okushirijima seihou 190 km sakusen kuiki", Kaku Heiki/Jiken Monitaa (239), August 1, 2005. http://www.peacedepot.org/nmtr/bcknmbr/nmtr239.pdf [PDF]

[11] For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release announcing the October 2005 extension of this law was headed: Japan decides to continue to dispatch MSDF vessels to the Indian Ocean in order to support international efforts to fight against terrorism (Extension of the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law). http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/terrorism/measure0510.html

[12] Richard Tanter, Japan, Heisei Militarization and the Bush Doctrine, Policy Forum Online, Nautilus Institute, PFO 04-42A, 2004, https://nautilus.org/publications/essays/napsnet/forum/policy-forum-archive/0442a_tanter-html/ and at length in Richard Tanter, "With Eyes Wide Shut: Japan, Heisei Militarization, and the Bush Doctrine", in Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Critical Views from

the Asia-Pacific, edited by Peter Van Ness and Mel Gurtov, (RoutledgeCurzon, 2005).

[13] See GlobalSecurity.com, Japan Maritime Self Defence Force Nihon Kaijyo Jieitai. http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/japan/jmsdf.htm

[14] For a brief but insightful examination of an emerging case for a reassessment of this claim with respect to China, see You Ji, " A New Era for Chinese Naval Expansion", Nautilus Institute, Austral Policy Forum 06-06A, 9 March 2006. http://nautilus.rmit.edu.au/forum-reports/0606a-you-ji.html

> "The PLAN is firmly committed to move in the direction of achieving partial superiority in a specific war situation relatively close to home waters. This will force the navy to add more advanced warships and sophisticated IW measures in the years to come. Consequently, this persistent modernization will gradually produce capabilities for long-range power projection beyond the initial combat design. The civilian leadership seems to have committed itself to providing enough national resources to this naval leap forward. Liu Huaqing's blue-water dream may be brought to reality sooner than we expect."

[15] The 200-strong ASDF contingent operating three C-130 Hercules transports is currently based in Kuwait, and flies regularly into southern Iraq. Recent reports suggest it will operate more widely in Iraq itself, and from Qatar. See "SDF to pull out from Iraq in April-May", Nikkei Net Interactive, February 27, 2006.

Nautilus invites your response

The Austral Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to the editor, Jane Mullett: austral@rmit.edu.au. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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