

Japan's part in the "coalition of the willing"

Joe Lopez
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Despite overwhelming opposition in Japan to the US-led war on Iraq, the Koizumi government has been one of the Bush administration's firmest backers from the outset. While restricted by its constitution from openly providing military support to the US, Japan was nevertheless listed as part of the so-called "coalition of the willing" that formally supported the invasion.

In the leadup to the onslaught on Iraq, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi had pushed for endorsement by the UN Security Council. But as soon as it became clear that would not be forthcoming, Tokyo fell into line behind Washington. Koizumi told reporters last month: "It wasn't a decision I pondered and worried over. I had made my decision a long time ago."

Opinion polls in Japan have variously recorded between 65 percent and 80 percent opposition to the US war. Tens of thousands attended rallies to express their revulsion at the one-sided conflict and the slaughter of thousands of Iraqis. The older participants were quick to recall their firsthand experience of the horrors of World War II.

Sumiko Haneda, a documentary filmmaker who attended a Tokyo protest, told the *Asia Times*: "It was a horrible time. I was always cold and hungry and my family was so poor we hardly had anything to wear. Thousands of lives were lost in a week when Tokyo was razed to the ground in 1945. If the US attacks Iraq, the same thing will happen and we Japanese must stop the carnage."

Inada Nada, a 76-year-old essayist, said: "I came today to remind you all that nobody should die for the sake of another country's victory. Japanese citizens will never allow this to happen because we know that war solves nothing and only results in hardship for the ordinary people."

Koizumi, however, has parroted the pretexts about Iraq's alleged "weapons of mass destruction" and the dangers of terrorism, pledging to assist with Iraq's reconstruction and offering Japanese soldiers for any postwar peacekeeping mission.

Reiterating his support for the war in early April, the Japanese prime minister said people would come to understand the dangers "when weapons of mass destruction, chemical and biological weapons, fall in the hands of a

dangerous despot". Hinting at some of the underlying reasons, he said: "The public knows the importance of the Japan-US alliance. The Japanese defence capability is not adequate, and with the security pact with the US, Japan is defending itself."

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage offered effusive praise at the time, declaring: "The unbelievably strong public support from Prime Minister Koizumi and his government for the United States is something President Bush and his administration will never forget." US ambassador Howard Baker Jr hailed Koizumi alongside Bush and Blair as "the three great leaders in the world".

While calling for UN support and an "international framework" for post-war reconstruction, Tokyo has given its blessing to the blatant quasi-colonial occupation of Iraq. As well as providing \$100 million in financial aid, Koizumi has offered to attach Japanese personnel—civilian or military—to the US Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) that will run Iraq. A parliamentary body has called on the US to give Japanese companies a share of the lucrative reconstruction contracts.

The major opposition parties voiced limited objections to the war. None opposed the war outright or exposed the predatory aims of US imperialism in the Middle East. Instead they wanted the war to have the imprimatur of the United Nations.

Democratic Party leader Naoto Kan complained: "He [Koizumi] had been repeating that it was desirable to have a new UN resolution. Did something new happen to change his view?" In a similar vein, Social Democratic Party leader Takako Doi said: "The Prime Minister has boarded a ship which he shouldn't have. Through his actions he has announced that he has parted company with UN-centred diplomacy."

Communist Party leader Kazuo Shii did not denounce the war, criticising Koizumi instead for failing to provide an adequate explanation. "He failed to give us any reason why the government backs the war," he said. Appealing to Japanese nationalism, Shii accused Koizumi of approving an arbitrary US decision "parrot-fashion".

There are definite calculations behind Koizumi's decision

to unconditionally back the US war, not least of which was the pressure brought to bear by the Bush administration.

A glimpse of the strong-arm tactics employed by Washington was provided by a discussion reported last month in the *Australian Financial Review* between Deputy Secretary of State Armitage and Democratic Party national security spokesman Seiji Maehara.

Asked by Maehara how the US would react to North Korea testing a nuclear device or a ballistic missile, Armitage shot back: “What would Japan do, and what should the US do if North Korea launches missiles against Japan? Until you answer my question I am not going to answer yours.”

Recalling the exchange later to journalists, Maehara declared: “By asking me the question, Mr. Armitage implied that we should support the US approach on Iraq, because even if North Korea’s situation gets aggravated, Japan would not be able to deal with it without any help from the US.”

As Koizumi hinted publicly, his government backed the Iraq war to ensure continuing US support for Japan’s strategic interests in North East Asia under the US-Japan Security Treaty. Japan’s ruling elites will also have concluded that Bush’s admonition, “if you are not with us, you are against us,” applies to economic issues as well as strategic alliances.

Having been mired in recession for the past decade, Japan is vulnerable to economic reprisals. The US remains Japan’s leading export market. Japan is also reliant on the Middle East for more than 90 percent of its oil imports. If Washington is to dictate terms in the Middle East, Tokyo wants to ensure that its access to oil, and profitable construction contracts in Iraq, is not impeded.

The Iraq war has opened up a broader debate in ruling circles about how to secure Japan’s long-term interests. The objections raised by the opposition parties to the US invasion reflect a broader fear that the Koizumi government’s support for the Bush administration could have disastrous consequences for Japan.

An editorial in the *Asahi Shimbun* last month entitled, “Backing of risky US war an incalculable loss for Japan,” declared: “The day the Iraq war began is likely to be remembered for a long time as a turning point in 21st century history. On this day, a New World structure emerged—one in which the United States is the sole designer and controller of the international order. Or worse, perhaps America pulled the trigger on this day to throw the world into unimaginable chaos. America may win this war, but it could also lose its honour. The world now stands on the verge of such chaos.”

The editorial warned that the US was “just too strong”.

“Nobody else is even close. And yet, it flaunts its military power even though it is far mightier than anything other nations might assemble together. The US economy, its culture and control of information have overrun the world.” While France and Germany had expressed “their defiance against America’s unipolar domination of the world,” Koizumi “chose to follow America amid gusts of headwind.”

Calls for Japan to take a more assertive stance are feeding into a discussion about military rearmament and removing the constitutional restriction—the so-called pacifist clause—on the aggressive use of the country’s military. Koizumi has long been an advocate of a stronger Japanese military but has calculated that this can be best achieved by maintaining close ties with the US—at this stage.

The Koizumi government has used the Bush administration’s “global war on terrorism” and the uncertainty generated by the Iraq war and tensions with North Korea to bolster the military. Japanese Defence Minister Shigaru Ishiba, following the logic of the so-called Bush doctrine, argued in February that Japan’s constitution did not prevent the country from taking pre-emptive action against a threatened North Korean missile attack.

Japan is already collaborating closely with Washington in the development of a ballistic missile defence system—ostensibly to counter the danger posed by North Korea. The real purpose of such a system is to blunt the military capabilities of China, which Bush has declared to be a “strategic competitor,” and other rivals for influence in North East Asia.

The conclusion is being drawn that Japan must have offensive capability if it is to carry out pre-emptive strikes. An article in the *Australian Financial Review* last week noted: “Japan’s backing for US-led ballistic missile defence is virtually a done deal. And the turn for Japan to acquire ‘offensive weapons for defensive purposes,’ such as Tomahawk cruise missiles and long-range bombers, is gathering momentum.”

In the face of the Bush administration’s unilateral war against Iraq, Japan—like Washington’s rivals in Europe—is concluding that it needs its own military capacity to defend its own interests.



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