

Koizumi sends Japanese troops to Iraq

James Conachy
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Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and his cabinet voted on December 9 to deploy Japan's ground, air and maritime self-defense forces (SDF) to participate in the US-led occupation of Iraq. The decision is a definitive turning point and has been recognised as such in Japan. For the first time since World War II, Japanese troops will enter what is unambiguously a war zone, with the expectation of seeing combat.

The Japanese force will number close to 1,100. Six hundred troops from the Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) will begin deploying by sea and air over the next several weeks to the strategic south-eastern Iraqi city of Samawah. The force will consist of engineering and water purification units, a 100-strong medical team and a detachment of armoured troops to protect the Japanese base camp and vehicle convoys. Their stated mission is to rebuild infrastructure such as schools and provide water to the communities around Samawah, but the units are clearly preparing for armed conflict.

Up to eight Japanese airforce transport planes will be deployed to Kuwait to assist the US occupation move supplies in and out of Iraq. The deployment also includes the dispatch of two destroyers to escort the transport ships moving the troops and equipment to Iraq.

Serious questions exist over the legality of the troop dispatch. The pacifist Article 9 of Japan's constitution forbids the country's government from "settling international disputes" by the "threat or use of force". Koizumi has sought to sidestep the issue with the claim that Japan is "not going to war" but sending troops to a "non-combat area" of Iraq to provide "humanitarian assistance". This, however, is a transparent ruse.

As far as the SDF is concerned, it is going to a war zone. Samawah, with a population 140,000, is just 240 kilometres from Baghdad and the site of a major bridge over the Euphrates River. It was a key objective during the initial stages of the American-British invasion. In late March, US forces fought a bitter battle with an estimated 1,500 Iraqi irregulars to secure control of the city, damaging numerous buildings and homes in the process.

Whatever humanitarian assistance the Japanese troops render to the local population, they will be operating in Samawah for only one, expressly military, purpose—to hold territory on behalf of the US occupation authority. The Japanese government's fact-finding mission reported to the cabinet that "there exists the possibility of attack" on their troops, as there

were "efforts by remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime to enter the [Samawah] region". In November, a suicide bomber killed 17 Italian troops and wounded dozens of others at Nasiriya—just 100 kilometres away.

The Japanese base will be erected on a hill some 10 kilometres out of Samawah city, with clear visibility of the surrounding area. It will be surrounded by a two metre-deep trench and have only one entrance, which will be protected by artillery pieces and machine gun posts. The road into the entrance will be built as a zig-zag pattern and lined with concrete walls and sandbags to prevent vehicles approaching the base at high speeds. All Japanese convoys will be escorted front and rear by armoured fighting vehicles with machine guns ready to fire. As well as their rifles, the Japanese troops are being issued with personal anti-tank weapons so they can destroy suicide car-bombers or resistance vehicles. Under their rules of engagement, they are permitted to fire first on Iraqis "aiming" their weapons. A contingent of Dutch troops in the area will provide support to the Japanese force.

Koizumi has justified the deployment by repeating Washington's lies: that the illegal US invasion of Iraq is an act of liberation and that the resistance of the Iraqi people to foreign occupation is "terrorism". Addressing a press conference following the cabinet decision, he declared: "The US is Japan's only ally, and it is striving very hard to build a stable and democratic government in Iraq. Japan must be a trustworthy ally to the US." His comments point to the real motivations for the decision, which are bound up with the fundamental strategic and economic interests of Japanese imperialism.

The Iraq deployment is in many respects the culmination of a 12-year process during which the Japanese ruling class has reasserted its right to use military power. In the 1990s, Japan dispatched troops to various United Nations peace-keeping operations, including Cambodia, Mozambique and East Timor. A substantial section of Japan's political elite—especially the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) factions associated with Koizumi—is committed to repudiating Article 9 and fully rehabilitating Japan as a major military power in the Asia-Pacific. Support for the Bush administration and its "war on terrorism" is a means for advancing these ambitions.

"Anti-terrorism" legislation passed following September 11, 2001, was utilised to deploy Japanese naval refueling ships into

the Indian Ocean to provide logistical support to the US fleet. The Japanese navy has also initiated aggressive patrols in the waters between Japan and the Korean peninsula. In December 2001, in the first combat mission by the Japanese military since 1945, a coast guard patrol boat attacked a North Korean vessel, sinking it and killing its crew.

At \$US49 billion per year, Japan's military spending is now the second-largest in the world—far outstripping Britain's \$36 billion—even though it is less than one percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product. Military analysts already rank the Japanese air force and navy as among the world's top three or four in terms of modernity and sophistication. The SDF, in cooperation with the US, is expanding its offensive capabilities through the acquisition of helicopter carriers, long-range refueling aircraft and land and sea-based missile defence systems.

Earlier in the year, an analyst told the *Asia Times*: “In purely logistical terms, Japan's defense agency is a sleeping giant. They have high training standards, a very efficient command structure, access to modern armaments, [and] technical support at the highest level.”

At the same time as providing a justification for a military build-up, which is particularly targeted against China and North Korea, support for the “war on terror” is seen in Tokyo as the means of expanding Japan's influence within the Middle East. Japan is contributing \$1.5 billion in grants to Iraqi reconstruction, along with an offer of a further \$3 billion in loans to whatever provisional government is ultimately installed by Washington. While US corporations are expected to win most of the reconstruction contracts, Iraq has a longer-term importance to Tokyo.

Japan is totally dependent on imported oil. Since the energy crisis of the 1970s, Japanese governments have sought to gain a greater degree of control over major Middle Eastern oilfields by insisting suppliers enter into long-term contracts that guarantee supply to Japan. In 2000, with contracts ending over Saudi fields, a consortium of state-backed Japanese companies entered in negotiations with Iran for a multi-billion dollar investment to develop the major Azadegan oil field. Over the past several years, the prospect of a US confrontation with Iran and open US opposition to any major Japanese investment in the country, have stalled the plans. Iraq, with the world's second largest oil reserves, offers an alternative.

Koizumi's decision to contribute troops has provoked considerable opposition in Japan, both within the general population and among rival sections of the political establishment. The main opposition party, the Democratic Party (DPJ), has opposed the dispatch of troops, as have the smaller opposition parties in the parliament.

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A poll conducted the day the decision was taken by the *Asahi Shimbun* found that 55 percent of respondents disagree with the

dispatch of troops under the current conditions in Iraq, with 26 percent opposing a dispatch under any conditions. The approval rating of Koizumi's cabinet fell to 41 percent, down from 47 percent.

The majority of Japanese people opposed the US invasion of Iraq. The subsequent months of an escalating guerilla war against the American occupation, as well as the deaths of two Japanese diplomats on November 30, have heightened concerns that any Japanese troops sent to Iraq could be targeted by the resistance. There are also concerns that Japan itself has become the target of terrorist attacks due to Koizumi's total support for the Bush administration's actions. A recent Al Qaeda broadcast named Japan alongside Britain, Australia and Spain as the main countries supporting American aggression in the Middle East.

In the lead-up to the decision to deploy troops, Makiko Tanaka, Koizumi's former foreign minister who is now working with the DPJ against his government, articulated the sentiment of a layer in the Japanese elite that there should be more distance between Tokyo and Washington. In an interview, she told the Australian Broadcasting Commission on December 4:

“I hope Mr Koizumi will not get a rush of blood and say ‘let's go’ in this dangerous situation... He should relax more and listen to other opinions. More than 70 percent of the public is against the dispatch. If, when the time comes, he says ‘let's go’, then he'll be acting like a dictator.

“Japan needs to express its own opinions. Our Foreign Ministry, Mr Koizumi and the government just cannot say no to America. Why is this? We should be able to say things to the United States. That is what being a real ally is all about. I remember saying ‘no’ to Colin Powell and the Russians. It results in discussions, but they won't kill you.”

Tanaka's views are by no means isolated. Koizumi's decision to dispatch troops is a direct repudiation of the stance taken by an LDP coalition partner, the Buddhist-based New Komeito Party. New Komeito argued that no SDF forces should go to Iraq until the fighting had clearly ended.

Koizumi is aware that deaths of Japanese soldiers, or deaths caused by them, could become the trigger for a wave of recriminations against his government, the breakup of the coalition with New Komeito or a move against his leadership. He told a visiting Iraqi delegation in November: “My cabinet may collapse if SDF personnel in Iraq face an unexpected turn of events”. Nevertheless, he has pushed ahead with the historic deployment in order to establish the precedent for the future dispatch of combat troops elsewhere and to condition the Japanese population to accept that likelihood.



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