

Japan withdraws naval support for US war in Afghanistan

John Chan

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Japan's Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda was forced last week to end the country's logistical support for the US-led war in Afghanistan. While the immediate reason was the refusal of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) to support enabling legislation in the upper house of the Diet, the government confronts broad popular hostility to its backing for the Bush administration's "war on terrorism".

In office for just over a month, Fukuda was unable to renew the "Anti-Terrorism Special Measure Law" that authorised Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF) to refuel US and allied warships in the Indian Ocean. The law expired on November 1. The Japanese oil tanker and its escort destroyer that were involved in the operation are now heading home.

The law was the subject of weeks of parliamentary debate. Fukuda argued that as the world's second largest economy, Japan must have a corresponding global military role. But the DPJ insisted the Afghan mission violated the pacifist clause of Japan's constitution. Fukuda attempted to compromise with DPJ leader Ichiro Ozawa last Tuesday but failed to reach agreement. With the DPJ threatening to oppose the law's renewal in the upper house, the government allowed the legislation to lapse.

The collapse of the naval operation in the Indian Ocean is not only a blow to the fragile Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government, but points to a broader crisis of Japanese foreign policy. Former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi latched onto the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" and backed the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as the means for advancing his own plans for subverting the constitution's pacifist clause, remilitarising Japan and adopting a more assertive stance in North East Asia.

Shinzo Abe took over from Koizumi last year and pursued similar policies, but quickly ran into political difficulties with a series of scandals. Behind the crisis was deepening public hostility to the revival of Japanese militarism and the government's socially-regressive market reforms. The LDP suffered a devastating defeat in elections in July, losing control of the upper house to the DPJ. Abe's failure to

secure the renewal of the naval operation in the Indian Ocean was a significant contributing factor in his decision to resign in September.

Fukuda, an experienced LDP politician and minister, was installed to stabilise the government. He modified the "anti-terrorism" bill to extend the naval mission by one year, instead of two, and imposed other operational restrictions. Significantly, however, he omitted the need for parliamentary approval for any future dispatch of naval units. Even with pressure from Washington and a UN vote expressing appreciation for Japan's naval mission, Fukuda was unable to secure the DPJ's support.

Fukuda's difficulties were compounded by a scandal that erupted over allegations that the naval operation had supplied oil for the US invasion of Iraq in breach of the "anti-terrorism" law. The Yokohama-based group Peace Depot first made the accusation in September that the Japanese navy had provided fuel for the US aircraft carrier, USS Kitty Hawk, on its way to bombard Iraq in February 2003.

In May 2003, then defence agency chief Shigeru Ishiba (now defence minister) told the upper house foreign affairs and defence committee that the Japanese supply ship, Tokiwa, had in February 2003 supplied 200,000 gallons of oil (about 760,000 litres) to the US naval oil tanker Pecos. The Pecos had, in turn, provided fuel to the USS Kitty Hawk, just before it moved into Persian Gulf.

Fukuda, who was then chief cabinet secretary, brushed aside criticism that the oil was used in the US invasion of Iraq. He told a press conference in May 2003 that 200,000 gallons of oil could only last the USS Kitty Hawk one day and therefore, could not have been used in the Iraq war. Japanese officers, however, found that the actual figure was four times higher—800,000 gallons—but nothing was done to correct Fukuda's statement.

Peace Depot activists unearthed the actual figures from US naval documents, forcing Fukuda last month to admit that he had made a mistake and to officially apologise. He continued to insist that what was involved was a small "clerical error" committed by low ranking-officers. The

Pentagon issued a statement denying that Japanese fuel had been used in military operations in Iraq, but the public furor continued.

Fukuda's failure to renew the "anti-terrorism" law is a further political setback for the Bush administration. Although the withdrawal of two Japanese ships will make little difference to the US military operations, the pull-out comes as the White House is seeking a greater military commitment in Afghanistan from its allies. At the same time, many of the countries that joined the "coalition of the willing", including Japan, have withdrawn their troops from the US-led occupation of Iraq.

The debate over the naval operation has not just created a crisis for the government. Last Friday, Fukuda proposed forming a "grand coalition" with the DPJ to end the political deadlock over the issue. Ozawa reportedly favoured the idea, but the majority of the DPJ leadership rejected the proposal outright, saying that it would undermine the party's popular standing. In response, Ozawa submitted his resignation as DPJ leader on Sunday, indicating sharp divisions within the party.

DPJ leaders are obviously worried the party would be compromised in the eyes of millions of voters if it joined the LDP in government. By posturing as an opponent of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the party has been able to capitalise on widespread antiwar sentiment. The latest Kyodo newsagency poll last week showed 42.4 percent of the respondents preferred a DPJ government, compared to 39.8 percent for the LDP. The approval rating for the Fukuda cabinet has fallen by 7.2 percent in a month to just over 50 percent.

The DPJ has no principled opposition to the US-led neo-colonial occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Ozawa recently wrote in a magazine article that he opposed Japan's naval operation because the US-led intervention in Afghanistan lacked a UN mandate, which he argued would override Japan's constitutional restrictions. Ozawa declared he would as prime minister be willing to send Japanese troops to join the NATO-led combat forces in Afghanistan if the UN endorsed the operation.

In November 2001, the DPJ voted in the upper and lower houses in favour of the refuelling mission. In 2004, while protesting against the dispatch of Japanese troops to Iraq and calling for UN approval, the DPJ boycotted the crucial parliamentary session, rather than voting against the decision. Its "opposition" to the Iraq war reflected growing concerns in sections of the Japanese ruling elite over the dangers of associating too closely with the Bush administration's military adventures.

At the same time, the DPJ is committed to maintaining the US-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of Japanese foreign

policy. It is considering its own "anti-terrorism" bill, which would assist the US-led occupation of Afghanistan with everything from food production to medical services—except direct deployment of Japanese troops. A major factor in the DPJ's opposition to Fukuda's bill is the calculation that it can force an early lower house election in which it will make substantial gains.

Polling has consistently shown that an overwhelming majority of Japanese voters are opposed to the war in Iraq. In March, an *Asahi Shimbun* poll found that 75 percent regarded the war as a mistake, 69 percent supported the withdrawal of Japanese troops in July 2006 and more than two-thirds wanted an end to Japan's air force mission in Kuwait in support of the US occupation of Iraq.

The Japanese government and media have attempted to portray the war in Afghanistan as qualitatively different from the occupation of Iraq. The claim was always a lie. The US military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were both part of long-held US plans to establish its dominance over the resource-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. Japan's support for the US wars was to ensure its own secure supplies of oil.

Support in Japan for the Afghanistan occupation has also been sliding. A *Mainichi Shimbun* poll in September found that the proportion in favour of Japan's naval mission had fallen to 48 percent—from 49 percent in the previous month. At the same time, 43 percent opposed its continuation—up from 42 percent.

Fukuda is reportedly considering pressing ahead with legislation to restart the refuelling mission. The LDP and its ally New Komeito have the numbers in the lower house to override a rejection in the DPJ-dominated upper house. While constitutional, such a move—the first since 1957—would mark a decisive break with the methods of consensus politics that have been the norm for decades. That Fukuda is even contemplating overruling the upper house is a sharp indication of the turmoil embroiling the entire political establishment.



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