

## **Japan's Role in Iraq Still Threatens Koizumi**

Llewelyn Hughes and Richard Samuels

Financial Times, April 26, 2004

Junichiro Koizumi, Japan's prime minister, dodged a political bullet last week. By releasing the Japanese civilian hostages, Iraqi militants allowed Mr Koizumi to avoid making a decision about whether to withdraw Japanese troops from Iraq or risk the hostages being harmed. Mr Koizumi managed to keep his pledge to stand up to terrorism while ensuring that the hostages were returned safely, and for this he has been vindicated in the media and opinion polls.

Yet these kidnappings have highlighted the dilemma facing Mr Koizumi and his government. Japan has long maintained that its pacifist constitution prohibits its forces from operating in combat zones or occupied countries, or engaging in collective defence. To circumvent these limitations, Mr. Koizumi ordered Japan's self defence forces (SDF) to south-east Iraq, where the security situation was judged to be relatively benign. There they have been ordered to carry out civil engineering and humanitarian tasks.

Mr Koizumi's decision to send Japanese troops to Iraq serves two purposes. First, it proves to the US that Japan is willing to "show the flag" in support. Japan is still smarting from the lack of recognition it received during the Gulf war in 1991, when assistance was limited to sending money in support of coalition forces.

Second, Mr Koizumi is aiming to stretch the constitutional constraints on Japan's security policy. As heir to a revisionist line that began with Nobusuke Kishi, a former prime minister from the 1950s, Mr Koizumi has worked hard since entering office to increase the scope of SDF activities. Japan's presence in Iraq should be seen partly as an extension of that effort.

Yet the worsening security situation in Iraq could spell trouble for his leadership. Pressure on him to withdraw Japan's forces is already coming from politicians who say that the area of the SDF operations may no longer be a non-combat area, and that Japan should consider withdrawing. The leader of Japan's major opposition Democratic Party recently likened Mr Koizumi to President George W. Bush for refusing to recognise that he may have made the wrong decision.

Unease would also grow within the ruling coalition itself. A senior LDP politician was forced to admit this week that Japan would have to withdraw if its forces were fired upon. Moreover, the LDP governs in coalition with the Buddhist-backed New Komeito, a party upon whose votes it increasingly relies. Although Komeito has remained publicly supportive of government policy until now, it has long appealed to the pacifist sentiment in the electorate, and has expressed nervousness about the direction Mr Koizumi is taking Japan's security policy. Komeito's leader has even mentioned the possibility of joining with the Democrats in the future.

There would be serious domestic and international consequences if Mr Koizumi was forced to call the troops home. With an election for the upper house of Japan's bicameral parliament due by late July, a withdrawal would give Mr Koizumi's opponents powerful ammunition. History suggests that a poor showing in this election would cost Mr Koizumi his job - as it did two recent prime ministers.

Further, the withdrawal of forces could reopen the deep cleavage over defence and security issues that was the central feature of Japanese politics in the 1950s and 1960s. After the demise of the Soviet Union, Japan has struggled to define a new and more active role for its forces within both the United Nations and alliance operations – a role that the Japanese public has edged toward accepting. Although this process would not be halted by a withdrawal, it is likely to revitalise those who argue that Japan should remain a civilian power.

Internationally, the repercussions could be grim for both Japan and the US. Spiralling violence in Iraq has put President George W. Bush's decision to wage war under an increasingly harsh spotlight. The withdrawal of a prominent member of his dwindling coalition would undermine the claim that the Iraq mission is multilateral in nature. Japan's withdrawal would also harm its bilateral alliance with the US as it would signal that Japan is not yet ready to become Washington's Britain of the east, taking on a greater burden within the alliance structure. Mr Koizumi's risky decision to send troops to Iraq, therefore, could still prove to be his political undoing and could also undermine the very alliance he was trying to reinforce.

*Llewelyn Hughes is a doctoral candidate in political science at MIT. Richard J. Samuels is professor of political science and director of the Center for International Studies at MIT*