

Japan On the Fifth Anniversary of the Iraq War

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a tough humanitarian situation. He then briefly outlined the assistance that the Japanese government has been giving to Iraq. Business as usual.

Michael Penn and the Asahi Shinbun

We have recently crossed the five-year mark since the American invasion of Iraq. President George W. Bush used the occasion to triumphantly declare that, due to his decision to invade, 'the world is better, and the United States of America is safer.'

If Japan appears unwilling to accept responsibility for the horrors it helped unleash in Iraq, the honorable exception is the Asahi Shinbun. Much maligned by their enemies, at least there are a few voices left in Japan that show a little reflection, show a little conscience.

In Japan, the Asahi Shinbun appears virtually alone in using this occasion to reflect upon the Iraq War. For all its pro-war cheerleading, the Yomiuri Shinbun did not even see fit to produce an English-language editorial on the subject. The Foreign Ministry offered no statement either. Iraq shattered and dying? Hmm, that's too bad -- just so long as it doesn't die on the streets of Tokyo.

The two English-language pieces that the Asahi published are reproduced in full here. Michael Penn

SDF Mission to Iraq Still Not Properly Evaluated

Sato Taketsugu

Among the political parties, only the Japan Communist Party seems to have marked the anniversary on their webpage. They also called for a small demonstration in the capital.

Five years ago Thursday (Japan time), U.S. bombers started pounding Iraq as part of an invasion force intended to topple Saddam Hussein, an action that would eventually embroil

When a reporter asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs press secretary to comment, he simply talked about the great political progress made in Iraq balanced against

Japan. Yet, key questions remain unanswered over Tokyo's decision to dispatch Self-Defense Forces to the war-torn nation. Why did Japan feel

so strongly that it had to support the U.S.-led invasion by sending SDF troops? What was its significance, justification and repercussions?

Unfortunately, the government has made no serious efforts to look into these and other key questions by reviewing what has taken place.

The dispatch of SDF personnel to Iraq marked a radical shift in Japan's diplomacy from its emphasis on working closely with the United Nations to putting priority on cooperating with the United States. Tokyo even stepped into a constitutional gray area with its decision to put Ground SDF troops in a nation where war was being waged. The government and the ruling coalition cannot afford to move ahead with proposed permanent legislation on SDF missions overseas without first reflecting on their decision to dispatch Japanese troops to Iraq.

At the outset, the government supported the U.S.-led invasion on grounds Saddam's regime had weapons of mass destruction. When the U.S. airstrikes on Baghdad got under way in March 2003, then Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro told President George W. Bush that it was 'natural' for Japan to support Washington because of the WMD issue. Koizumi told the nation that Iraq was 'not somebody else's problem.'

But those weapons did not exist.

The government eventually dropped 'activities to help dispose of WMDs from a draft of a special measures bill to support rebuilding Iraq. Bush himself later admitted that U.S. intelligence had erred on the issue of WMDs, which at a stroke negated the justification for the SDF dispatch.

But the miscalculations did not stop there.

'Never did we expect the Iraq situation to sink this deep into a quagmire,' says a senior Defense Ministry official. To tone down the 'military' colors in the special measures law, the government made the dispatch of civilian personnel another pillar of Japan's rebuilding assistance program. Four years since SDF personnel were first dispatched, the government has still been unable to send civilians.

Tokyo deployed troops in early 2004, prodded by Washington's call for 'boots on the ground.' The decision did not have the blessing of the United Nations. The government argued that the dispatch did not infringe on the constitutional ban on the use of the force because the SDF would work only in 'non-combat' areas for reconstruction assistance. Koizumi brandished this argument in the Diet to defend the constitutionality of the mission.



SDF forces deployed to Iraq

Tokyo has since stepped up its cooperation with Washington, from missile defense to the realignment of U.S. forces. 'It shows that Japan and the United States got closer because of the decision to send the SDF to Iraq,' says a senior Foreign Ministry official.



SDF charm offensive in Iraq. This image appeared on Japanese water trucks

The Fukuda administration aims to enact a permanent law to enable the SDF to join a U.S.-led multinational force for peace cooperation. But

discussions stalled after a series of scandals involving the Defense Ministry and the SDF, the latest being the Feb. 19 collision of an Aegis-equipped destroyer with a fishing boat. Suspicions that the SDF fuel supplied to U.S. vessels in the Indian Ocean may have been diverted to the Iraq war have also divided the public on the anti-terror mission.

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Iraq War Five Years On

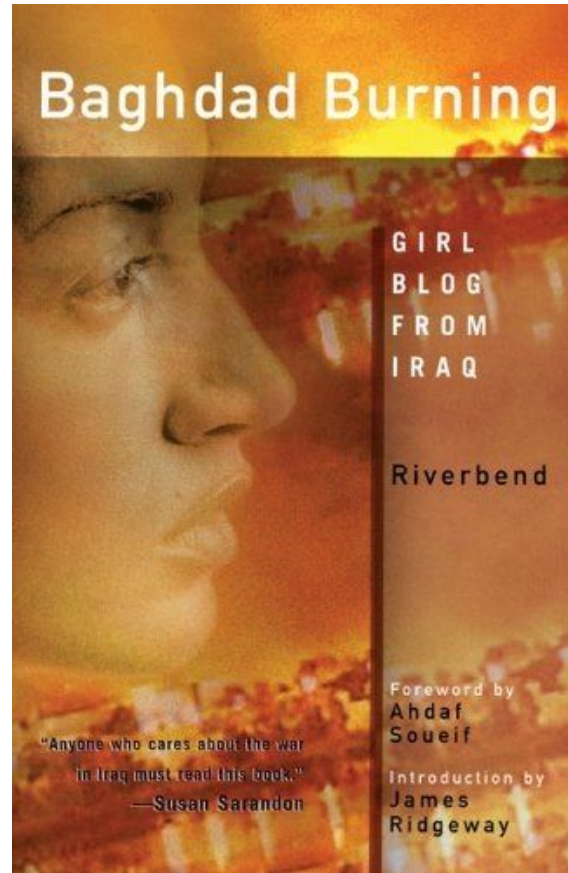
Five years have elapsed since the start of the Iraq war, but there are people who are still trying to justify this historic blunder.

President George W. Bush asserted in his State of the Union address in late January that 'high-profile terrorist attacks are down.' He went on: 'The Iraqis still have a distance to travel. But after decades of dictatorship and the pain of sectarian violence, reconciliation is taking place -- and the Iraqi people are taking control of their future.'

According to figures released by the Bush administration, there have been fewer terrorist attacks in Iraq since the 30,000-strong U.S. troop surge last spring.

But the drop in the number of the attacks is not proof that the Iraq war has turned for the better, nor does it suggest that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was anything other than a huge mistake. About 4,000 U.S. troops have been killed in this war. The World Health Organization estimates that Iraqi civilian deaths must have reached 150,000 in June last year. How many more have been killed since then?

'Baghdad Burning,' an English-language blog by an Iraqi girl, contains this passage: 'The tears had stopped about an hour after we'd left Baghdad. Just seeing the dirty streets, the ruins of buildings and houses, the smoke-filled horizon all helped me realize how fortunate I was to have a chance for something safer.' This is her recollection of the day she and her family left Baghdad last year to seek safety in Syria.



More than 2 million Iraqis have fled their country to become refugees. Another 2 million Iraqis have become displaced. For these people, Bush's speech must have sounded as if it came from another planet.



Iraq Refugees

The U.S. military resorted to a dangerous gamble to restore stability in Iraq. By providing weapons and funds to Sunnis in anti-U.S. regions, the Americans sought to pit them against terrorist factions affiliated with al-Qaida, the international terrorist organization headed by Osama bin Laden. This setup helps to minimize U.S. troop casualties. It also makes attacks against the terrorist factions more effective because they are being mounted by Iraqis who are familiar with the situation on the ground.

But even if the gamble pays off and temporarily restores stability, experts on Iraq are increasingly voicing concern that those U.S.-supplied weapons will be eventually used in sectional conflicts that will spell even more Iraqi deaths.

Iraq is not the only country where things are going south. In Afghanistan, the fundamentalist Taliban regime, toppled in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, has regrouped, making the country unsafe again while Washington remains mired in Iraq.

Amid the turmoil in Afghanistan, the political situation in neighboring Pakistan became volatile. Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was assassinated last December. President Pervez Musharraf, who supported America's 'war against terror,' is now on the verge of being forced out of office.

And while the Palestinian peace process grew even more uncertain, Turkish forces attacked Kurdish communities in northern Iraq. In Iran, last week's legislative election was won by supporters of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a hard-line anti-American conservative, by a landslide.

The Middle East has always been a hot spot, which is all the more reason why Washington needs to deal with this region with utmost care. But the present reality is that the situation has effectively spun out of control since the start of the Iraq war five years ago. Anti-U.S. sentiment is escalating throughout the Middle East.

The justification for this war, which Bush used to argue fervidly, has since evaporated completely. Contrary to the Bush administration's insistence, the weapons of mass destruction did not exist. And hardly anybody is talking anymore about the once-popular slogan of 'democratizing the Middle East.'

Bush's popularity back home is abysmal. In other countries that sent troops to Iraq in support of Bush's war, not a few leaders have since been driven out of power by popular vote or due to low job approval ratings.

We believe the key reason for this disastrous state of affairs is that the United States went after the wrong enemy. What Washington should

have done was to seek the support of the Arab-Islamic world to isolate and drive al-Qaida into a corner.

Instead, the Bush administration declared war on Saddam Hussein and his regime -- which had nothing to do with al-Qaida -- for the most spurious of reasons. This created a rift in the international community and made enemies of even moderate Muslims.

Bitter feelings linger in the international community, particularly in Germany and France that opposed the Iraq war. A good number of nations -- even those that did not send troops to Iraq -- still participated in Bush's 'war against terror' in all sorts of ways because they valued their alliance with the United States. The battlefield expanded and the United Nations was helpless to exercise its influence. Japan certainly bears a part of the blame for supporting this war.

There is no panacea for ending this mess. So long as a large U.S. military contingent remains stationed in Iraq, anti-U.S. terrorism will continue. But withdrawing from Iraq before the situation stabilizes could trigger a civil war. This is the dilemma that Washington faces.

One cause for concern is that the longer the Iraq debacle continues, the United States could become 'worn out' not only militarily, but also economically, diplomatically, and in terms of

'soft power.' The United States is still the world's sole superpower, but its leadership could be eroded. For Japan, which has North Korea's nuclear problem to contend with, the debilitation of its key ally is certainly not desirable.

The United States must get over its major blunder in Iraq and find a way out. We hope the presidential debates before the November election will serve as a cue. But for that, the United States must first face and accept the fact that it has gone against the wrong enemy, and think once again about where its true target lies.

The international community, too, must rebuild a system that will enable all its members to work together to contain international terror. It will not be easy, but efforts must be made to ameliorate the growing hostility and distrust of the Arab-Islamic world toward the United States and the Western world.

We in Japan must think seriously what our country can do.

This article appeared in The Asahi Shinbun on March 19, 2008.

THE LEGACY of Japan's GSDF IN SAMAWA

Michael Penn

Kyodo News on March 29 produced a follow-up piece on GSDF reconstruction projects in Samawa. For the entire period that the GSDF was stationed in its base near Samawa, the Koizumi Administration and its camp followers repeatedly insisted that their presence was needed there in order to carry out 'humanitarian and reconstruction support activities.'

It is not easy to evaluate clearly the degree to which the local community in Samawa benefited from the GSDF activities. During the GSDF deployment itself, most news reports suggested that a majority of the local people were pleased to have the Japanese among them as they imagined that their presence would signal major improvements in the local economy and because the Japanese troops didn't shoot anybody. On the other hand, there was a minority -- apparently affiliated with the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr -- who did not welcome the GSDF on the Iraqi nationalist grounds that they were allies of the American occupiers. These people fired mortars at the GSDF base and created a sense of threat, but never actually wounded any Japanese soldiers. The fact that the GSDF was able to complete their 2 1/2 years in Iraq without taking any casualties can be regarded as a success for the political supporters of the mission. They seem to have benefited from a combination of careful planning, risk-avoiding local strategies, and

simple good luck.



Japan hired Iraqis to renovate the Samawa Secondary School for Girls and provided a mural

The total amount of money that Japan spent on Iraqi reconstruction is impressive. Tokyo pledged US\$1.5 billion in grant aid and US\$3.5 billion in loans at the Madrid Conference of October 2003. Since that time, MOFA has been announcing various projects on which this money would be spent. MOFA says that the US\$1.5 billion in grants has already been completely distributed, and that in fact an additional US\$105 million in emergency grant aid was provided to Iraq over the course of 2007 (see Shingetsu Newsletter No. 529). Beyond all of this, Tokyo has pledged to forgive 80% of Iraq's debts from the Saddam Husain era, which totaled about US\$7.6 billion (see Shingetsu Newsletter No. 123). I'm not an economist, but I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the real cost of the Iraq adventure to the Japanese taxpayer is now well over US\$10 billion.

At any rate, the point of the Kyodo News report released yesterday is that for all of this

investment, the real improvements in Samawa may not be great. As they put it, 'there are many examples of mismanaged support.' One of the key problems seems to be that the local Iraqis don't have the technical training necessary to complete and operate these projects. (In the 1980s, Iraq was one of the most sophisticated countries in the developing world in this respect.)

Muhammad Jordan, chairman of the construction committee of the al-Muthanna provincial council, stated that 'it is strange to rely on others to rebuild your home. The Japanese did their best to assist the al-Muthanna people, but the problems were with those (Iraqi) people.' Saad Rahim Salman, a manager at a large local power plant said, 'It is the first time for the Iraqi people to embark on such a large-size project from scratch. There are no foreign engineers... There are many holidays in Islam.'

The Kyodo News report continues by noting that 'there are precision medical devices that cannot be used due to a lack of parts, and power generators abandoned because of the delivery of secondhand ones.'

Some local people, like schoolteacher Salah Khlaif, supported the GSDF mission: 'The withdrawal was too early. I wanted Japan to stay longer.' Others, like the unemployed Haidar Nassir, were not impressed with the help from

Tokyo: 'The Japanese support has left only vulgar rich people and corruption behind.'

Returning to the crucial power plant project mentioned above, an engineer at the plant referred to the fact that construction has been well behind schedule. Construction began in April 2006 and was scheduled for completion last November. The new target is June of this year. The engineer explained, 'The appearance is 90% complete, but the core part is still only 60% complete.'

Hmm. So it appears attractive on the face of it, but is hollow at the core, eh?

That's not a bad metaphor for Tokyo's entire Iraq War policy.

THE 'STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP' AND THE RECONCILIATION DIALOGUE

Did Japan Focus and the Shingetsu Newsletter change Japanese policy on Iraq? I don't know. But since the time I wrote my critique of the concept of the 'long-term and strategic partnership' between Japan and Iraq the slogan seems to have disappeared from MOFA statements. Perhaps my essay caused them to reevaluate their message? Or perhaps they have dropped the slogan for reasons entirely unrelated to my essay in Shingetsu Newsletter No. 807? Or

is the slogan still alive, but they just haven't mentioned it in the last four months?

This past week Tokyo hosted the 'Second Seminar on National Reconciliation of Iraq.' The program saw invitations to thirteen Iraqi MPs and others (eleven actually attended) who were Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish. The only participant who was named in the press was Kurdish parliamentarian Alaa al-Talabani. As the official MOFA statement put it: 'The Seminar is held based on the consideration that the promotion of national reconciliation among different ethnic/sectarian groups is essential for a solid stabilization of Iraq, while the current security situation in Iraq showing signs of improvement. It is expected that Japan's efforts of holding such Seminar would contribute to that end. During the period, the delegation will have meetings with the Japanese Government officials as well as the members of the Japanese parliament. The participants will also discuss among themselves on the current issues of Iraq such as Oil and Gas Law, Amendment of the Constitution and Federalism. Further, visit to Hiroshima is planned so that they can share the experiences of Japan's post-war democratization, peace building, and reconstruction.'

However, the MOFA statement said nothing about the 'long-term and strategic partnership' between Japan and Iraq as we might have expected on such an occasion.

A somewhat similar program occurred in February. Upon the request, apparently, of the office of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and the Iraqi Foreign Ministry (both offices currently held by Kurds), MOFA and JICA offering training programs for Iraqi diplomats.

Again, on that occasion, there was no mention of the 'long-term and strategic partnership.'

It thus seems that the 'long-term' partnership may have thus lasted all of eight months.

RECENT JAPANESE AID TO IRAQ

In the past four months, most reports on Japan-Iraq relations have concerned aid programs. The following is a round-up of both public and private aid stories:

-- In late December, Tokyo donated through the UNHCR 1,000 tents for Iraqi refugees.

-- At the beginning of this year, it was announced that an unnamed Japanese signed an agreement of cooperation with Iraq's Electricity Ministry. The company was to rehabilitate the gas-powered Taji electrical station located in northern Baghdad. Apparently, the awarding

of this contract to the unnamed Japanese company was tied to a grant that Tokyo offered to the Electricity Ministry.

-- In January, it was announced that the next round of reconstruction loans, part of the US\$3.5 billion mentioned above, would be targeted on repair of the Al-Musaib thermal power station in suburban Baghdad, the restoration of tanker mooring facilities off Basra, and the construction of roads and bridges near Samawa.

-- In February, the Yomiuri reported about a Yokohama-based NPO that was selling chocolate in the run-up to St. Valentine's Day in order to raise money for medicine and classes for Iraqi children.

-- Also in February, MOFA donated almost US\$19 million through the UNDP for the establishment of a maternity and children's hospital in Falluja. This project seems to have a close relationship to the activities of the Hashida Memorial Mohammed Fund run by the wife of slain Japanese journalist Shinsuke Hashida.

-- In March, MOFA offered almost US\$30,000 for another maternity and children's hospital in Sadr City, Baghdad.

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