

## JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

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## Troubles in the Ministry of Defense of Japan: Implications For the U.S.-Japan Alliance

By Yuki Tatsumi

There have been several recent developments that are positive for the U.S.-Japan alliance. The two countries successfully conducted Japan's ballistic missile defense (BMD) test in Hawaii last month. On January 11, the new Replenishment Support Special Measures Law was finally enacted when the House of Representatives of the Japanese Diet overrode the opposition of the House of Councilors. A revision of a previous measure that expired in November 2007, the law authorizes the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF) to conduct refueling operations for coalition forces in the Indian Ocean, which are expected to resume as early as late February. More significantly, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) are finally thinking more seriously about a permanent legal framework to authorize Self-Defense Force (SDF) missions overseas. Although the prospects for such legislation in the near future remain unclear, this is a step in the right direction for Japan, as it paves the way to end Japan's past ad hoc responses to requests for SDF support. However, a series of scandals involving the Ministry of Defense of Japan (MOD) could be a roadblock for Tokyo and Washington going forward.

### The Rise and Fall of the Ministry of Defense

Last year proved tumultuous for the MOD. Although the year began on a high note with the Japan Defense Agency attaining ministerial status, the newly established MOD was plagued with a number of policy challenges, such as SDF modernization, the realignment of U.S. forces in Japan, and downward pressure on the defense budget, as well as internal problems. In fact, MOD's misfortune predates 2007—it began with the revelation in 2006 that SDF personnel had leaked classified information, some of which was provided by the United States. The situation was aggravated by very public sparring in August 2007 between then defense minister Yuriko Koike and retiring defense vice minister Takemasa Moriya over the appointment of Moriya's successor, symbolizing tension between political appointees and professional bureaucrats. Finally, the reputation of the MOD suffered a huge blow when it was revealed in October 2007 that Moriya—who preached ethical behavior to his subordinates—received financial and other intangible “perks” from Yamada Corporation, a trading firm in Japan that represents U.S. and other foreign defense contractors in the defense procurement process.

It is easy to blame the MOD for its current predicament. Leaking confidential information is inexcusable, especially when intelligence sharing is one area where Japan is pursuing deeper cooperation with the United States. Japan's defense procurement processes, often obsessed with *kokusanka* (indigenous development), have resulted in grossly expensive defense acquisition programs, and the lack of transparency in procurement decisions has often been criticized. The legitimacy of MOD's management style—a small number of civilian bureaucrats, not the political leaders or others who can be held accountable vis-à-vis the public, manage the SDF—has also been called into question. These issues need to be addressed if the MOD is to function as the core national security policy agency. Yet they aren't new. The institutional problems within the MOD have been articulated in the past, namely in a report by the Council on Security and Defense Issues (better known as the Araki Report in the United States) back in December 2004. This begs the question of why they remain unaddressed.

### Can't Fault MOD Alone

Let us recognize that the lack of interest in national security issues both among political leaders and the public has contributed to the recent management failures at MOD. Historically, politicians tended to be indifferent toward

national security matters because they did not “buy” them votes. As a result, many remain ignorant of the most basic security issues. Even the few who are interested and knowledgeable are too often focused on technical details rather than the broader geostrategic issues that inform defense policy. In short, there is no capacity in the Diet for politicians to systematically deliberate, legislate, and evaluate how the MOD conducts its business as the primary agency responsible for national security.

The Fukuda cabinet has established the Council for Reforming the Ministry of Defense to focus on MOD problems, but the discussions will not get very far. The turmoil in the MOD has already placed the budget under tighter scrutiny than in previous years; the current midterm defense program, typically aimed at improving Japan’s defense capabilities over a five-year period, will be terminated a year early and revised with smaller force modernization and acquisition packages in mind. In the meantime, no one—political leaders, experts, and the media alike—will discuss the need to change the mindset of Diet members so that they realize their responsibility as political leaders to at least try to learn how Japan defends itself. Frankly, now that MOD scandals no longer make front page news, and the government has other domestic political issues to deal with, it is easier to continue to criticize the MOD than to consider the consequences of its weakness.

### **Threatening a Strong Alliance**

Why should all of this matter to Washington? In today’s security environment, the Pentagon needs a strong and effective MOD that can make policy decisions and work with the Diet to implement them in a timely manner. MOD programs must be sufficiently funded to modernize the SDF and maintain interoperability with U.S. forces. But recent developments suggest movement in the direction of a weaker and battered MOD. Despite the recent announcement of drastic personnel changes at senior official levels, it will take months for the MOD to recover from the damage of new revelations. There is a real danger that the Pentagon will have to deal with a counterpart incapable of making tough decisions for some time to come.

To be sure, the MOD needs institutional and cultural change. However, that process should not tie MOD’s hands too tightly given the strategic challenges Japan faces in Asia and elsewhere. A weakened MOD is bad for the alliance because it will prevent the measures necessary for Japan to become a more capable and reliable security partner. Before continuing to bash the MOD, responsible Japanese political leaders should pause and ponder the effect of a weaker MOD on Japanese security writ large.

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