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THE NEW DEFENSE MINISTRY RAISES JAPAN'S PROFILE OVERSEAS

Akira Hiyoshi

On January 9, Japan's Defense Agency was upgraded to a full-fledged ministry. From its founding in 1954, the Defense Agency had remained a subordinate body under the Cabinet Office without ministry status. The recent elevation to a ministry has finally made Japan a "normal" country in a sense, but still I am surprised at the fact that it has taken such a long time. The two ministries that should serve as the pillars of Japan's external relations, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense, can now work on an equal footing. The meetings held in Washington, D.C. in early May among Japan's foreign and defense ministers and their US counterparts were as respectable as they were substantive.

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National defense is fundamental to the nation's existence, comprising one of the core functions of a state – along with diplomacy, law enforcement and finance – that cannot be entrusted to the private sector. The administrative body in charge of national defense should thus be positioned accordingly within the structure of the national government.

The legal revisions that upgraded the Defense Agency have also transformed some of the previously-stipulated secondary duties of the Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) into primary SDF duties alongside national defense and disaster relief activities. Among the international activities that have been added over time to the SDF's mission in response to international developments are emergency relief activities, cooperation in United Nations peacekeeping missions, transportation of Japanese nationals, and provision of logistical support to US forces in the areas surrounding Japan. Demining activities, originally defined as a secondary responsibility when the SDF officially came into being in 1954, were also upgraded to a primary duty. These activities apparently differ in nature from other ancillary responsibilities of the SDF such as civil engineering work and assistance for athletic events, which can be described as utilizing the SDF's defense capabilities in peacetime.

It goes without saying that these legal amendments were vitally needed. Nevertheless, during the Diet deliberations and in some media reporting, concerns were raised about the threats that these amendments posed to the basic principles of our national defense policy, including the doctrine of "defensive defense," the pledge to never become a military power, the "three non-nuclear principles," and the strict practice of civilian control. Opponents feared that the legal revisions would lead to the enactment of a permanent law enabling SDF personnel to take part in broad international peace cooperation activities without prior Diet scrutiny of each mission. They were also concerned that the revisions would encourage debate on easing the rules on the use of weapons by SDF personnel overseas and accelerate efforts promoting the exercise of the right of collective self-defense. However, these


issues and concerns have essentially nothing to do with the latest amendments to the status of the Defense Agency and the SDF's missions, and should be addressed separately if necessary.

Underlying the continual reemergence of such arguments is the ambiguous article in the Japanese Constitution regarding the right of self-defense. Article 9 of the Constitution states, "Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained." This article has given rise to the interpretation that even the possession of a military for self-defense, considered to be a natural right of the nation, is constitutionally prohibited. Given that the recent legal changes to upgrade the Defense Agency gained the overwhelming support not only of the ruling parties but also of the main opposition, it is natural to assume that the time is ripe to have a serious discussion on revising the Constitution.

Japan will receive increasing requests to send the SDF to the world's trouble spots. We must make cool-headed judgments on whether and how to meet the requests, taking into consideration our own security concerns and priorities as well as the capabilities of the SDF. Reviewing the standards for the use of weapons will be necessary if we are to make our overseas missions more effective by ensuring the safety of SDF personnel while they work alongside other nations' forces. Furthermore we will not be able to avoid discussions on a permanent law allowing the SDF to engage in overseas peacekeeping missions and on the right of collective self-defense.

Our country is narrow and not well blessed with natural resources. The population of our rapidly aging society is shrinking and the financial crisis is not over. In contrast, one of our neighboring countries is increasing its economic and military power significantly at a time when the international influence of our most important

ally, the United States, is declining, and the concerns and interests of Japan have somewhat diverged from those of the United States, as was shown in the recent negotiations over the North Korean nuclear issue. In such a complex and difficult situation, drawing up a carefully worked-out, robust security policy from a comprehensive and long-term perspective appears more urgent than ever.

The Defense Ministry should be responsible not only for operation of the SDF but also for comprehensive national security policy planning, as was mentioned in the supplementary resolutions adopted by both houses of the Diet when they enacted the aforementioned set of legal revisions. I hope the ministry will perform its important duties with unceasing efforts and keen insight. 

Akira Hiyoshi is President of the National Council of Defense Associations and a Councilor of the Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS). He was Defense Agency Vice Minister between 1991 and 1993. This is a revised version of the original Japanese article that appeared in "RIPS' Eye" (a biweekly op-ed website of RIPS), No. 72 (January 23, 2007).