From the Frontlines of Defense to Aegis Ashore: Japan's changing security environment and Japan-U.S. Alliance

Serving as Chief of Staff, Joint Staff, the highest ranking officer of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), for five years, Mr. Kawano enjoyed the confidence of then Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and was thoroughly informed about all aspects from the frontlines to the center of command. Now that he has retired from office, he speaks about the security arrangements from his own experience.

Kawano Katsutoshi, Former Admiral, Chief of Staff, Joint Staff

—— Mr. Kawano, your career coincided with major changes in Japan's security arrangements after the end of the Cold War. How has the role of the JSDF changed over time?

Kawano Katsutoshi: The turning point was the Gulf Crisis in August 1990 followed by the start of the Gulf War in January 1991. It was the first global military crisis to occur after the end of the Cold War, and the Japanese government provided $13 billion in financial contributions to the multinational force led by the United States, but, being dependent on oil from the Middle East, Japan did not send any personnel, which generated dissatisfaction and criticism. As a result, the government was shocked to find that the Kuwaiti government omitted Japan from a full-page ad published as a form of thank you in U.S. newspapers after the war.

Kawano Katsutoshi, Former Admiral, Chief of Staff, Joint Staff

JSDF Entered the Era of Operations

——What was it like on the frontlines?

Kawano: I was lieutenant commander at the time, and it was my job to negotiate with the U.S. Navy. What I saw was that Japan was unprepared and thrown into confusion when pressed to respond to the crisis. During the Cold War, all Japan had to do was to defend the country against the Soviet Union, its biggest threat. However, at the time of the Gulf War, questions were asked about how to contribute to global stability, what kinds of alliances to form, and what role to play in it all. Incidentally, at first Japan considered dispatching Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) and other civilians as its personnel contribution, which, seen in hindsight, feels as if Japan was having an irrelevant discussion and ran out of time without being able to do anything.

The 1985 Iran-Iraq War had provided precedent. In 1987, then Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro had considered dispatching Japan Coast Guard patrol ships or marine-sweepers of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) to the Persian Gulf, but the plan had not materialized because of strong opposition by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Gotoda Masaharu. In the end, Japan contributed to the cost of installing Long-Range Navigation (LORAN) for the tactical air navigation system (TACAN) in the Strait of Hormuz. The plan avoided the issue of personnel contributions and muddled through with financial contributions, and they emulated this at the time of the Gulf War.

—— Personnel contributions gained momentum with the Gulf War.

Kawano: As the first step, JMSDF marine-sweepers were dispatched to the Persian Gulf in April 1991 where they disabled 34 mines before returning to base in September. This was the start of dispatching the JSDF. However, there was strong opposition in Japan. The marine-sweepers were dispatched after the war had ended, but any contradiction of Article 9 (renunciation of war, denial of belligerent rights) of the Japanese Constitution ran into deep-seated opposition in Japan. At the time, I felt that the background for the arguments against the dispatch was a lack of confidence in the JSDF. The JSDF had been training and deployed for disaster relief since it was set up in 1954, but as far as the public was concerned, they were invisible and overshadowed by the image of the old Japanese army. Action was the only way to gain confidence, but the lack of opportunities presented a dilemma.

However, the dispatch of the marine-sweepers provided the starting point for drawing up the International Peace Cooperation Law, and a Civil Engineering Squad from the Japan Ground Self Defense Force (JGSDF) was dispatched to Cambodia as part of the UN peacekeeping operations (PKO). Public perceptions also changed with the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995 and the deployment of the Japan Disaster Relief Team to disasters in Japan and abroad. The disaster relief operations at the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, in particular, had a significant influence on public sentiment.

—— The JSDF has also changed in relation to the Japan-U.S. Alliance.

Kawano: Looking back, the Heisei era (1989–2019), which comprised most of my career as a self-defense official, was a historical turning point, one when the JSDF changed from a JSDF that simply exists to a JSDF that is on the move. Running operations is reality for a JSDF that is on the move. The mine-clearing and PKO operations in the 1990s were neutral operations, but at the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, we provided logistical support in the form of refueling operations in the Indian Ocean to the Coalition of the Willing centered on the United States. This was followed by the JGSDF and JASDF providing reconstruction assistance to Iraq (2004–08), which was significant from the perspectives of both international security arrangements and the Japan-U.S. Alliance. One can say that they symbolize the era of operations.

Toward an Alliance that Shares Risk

——The nature of the Japan-U.S. Alliance has changed with the times.

Kawano: In September 1951, then Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru concluded the Security Treaty Between the United States and Japan (revised/amended as the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan in 1961) directly after the San Francisco Peace Conference. While there was a strong sense of wanting to rehabilitate the economy of postwar Japan, the interests of the National Police Reserve, the predecessor of the JSDF, which had only just been formed, and those of the United States, which was fighting the Korean War and did not favor a withdrawal, coincided to create the basic structure, still in place today, where the U.S. Army stays at the invitation of Japan.

Recently, President Trump caused a stir by claiming that the Japan-U.S. Alliance is unfair, but remarks pointing out the asymmetries in the Japan-U.S. security arrangements are to some extent part of the general discussion in the United States. To be fair, of course, both the Japanese and U.S. governments understand that a balance is struck by Article 5 (act to meet common danger) and Article 6 (grant use of facilities) of the current Japan–U.S. Security Treaty (Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan). However, sharing risks is the foundation of an alliance. In an emergency, the blood of young Americans may even flow. So, I think the alliance must be one of mutual assistance. In the sense of operations on the frontlines, it is unlikely that the division of roles decided immediately after the end of the war will be viable in the future amid the significant changes in the global situation. Also, as an organization, the JSDF is already one of the largest defense forces in the world. We need to think flexibly about how to substantiate the Japan-U.S. Alliance within the scope of Article 9 of the Constitution. In that sense, the Legislation for Peace and Security approved in 2015 was a major step forward.

——What is the significance of the Legislation for Peace and Security seen from the frontlines?

Kawano: Although limited from the perspective of the Japan-U.S. Alliance, the legislation enables us to exercise the right of collective self-defense in an emergency, and it is also possible to protect U.S. warships. The right of collective self-defense will only materialize in an emergency, but protecting U.S. warships is something that we actually do in peace time, so the fact that Japan has changed and that the ties with and confidence in the Japan-U.S. Alliance are stronger is appreciated.

—— In terms of sharing risks, the JMSDF protected USS *Kitty Hawk* immediately after 9/11.

Kawano: When the *Kitty Hawk* left the port at Yokosuka as a result of the terror attacks, we carried out warning and surveillance activities as part of investigation and research under the Act for Establishment of the Ministry of Defense (1954) based on the urgency of the international situation at the time, but there was a pervasive sense that if we got the response wrong, the Japan-U.S. Alliance would be on the verge of crisis.

——The Maritime Staff Office (MSO) was also criticized for operating independently.

Kawano: It was of course impossible to make arbitrary decisions and we only acted after reporting to the proper authorities, but as a result, there were some communication shortcomings, and we were criticized for this. Since I was director of the Defense Division, Maritime Staff Office I was prepared for reprimands. At the same time, CNN and other U.S. media were repeatedly reporting on the situation, and I was pleased to see that the American people, who had been devastated by the terror attacks, were moved, and that the U.S. government expressed its gratitude to the JSDF. Thanks to them, I wasn't reprimanded.

Facing the Upheaval in Northeast Asia as Chief of Staff, Joint Staff

——By the early 2000s, armed forces worldwide were integrating their chains of command.

Kawano: This is because they recognized the growing complexity and widening scope of operations worldwide. The United States was the first to promote integration with the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. The JSDF also reformed what had been a compartmentalized land, sea, air structure and set up the Joint Staff Office in 2006 to create a system where operations were basically integrated. For example, to secure the safety of the Middle Eastern sea lanes, we collected information in collaboration with each country, and expanded anti-piracy operations to Djibouti in East Africa. At the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake, we organized the Joint Task Force (JTF) of more than 100,000 troops, and carried out disaster relief as joint operations. This trend for integration is hardly reversible.

—— By the early 2010s, the situation was changing rapidly in Northeast Asia when you took up the post of Admiral, Chief of Staff, Joint Staff in 2014.

Kawano: China's movements became increasingly aggressive with regard to the situation in the Senkaku Islands after the nationalization in 2012. In 2013, a Chinese navy ship locked its radar on a JMSDF destroyer and in 2016 a large fleet of Chinese fishing boats neared the islands. As of 2012, North Korea was also frequently launching missiles into the Sea of Japan. Personally, I gave my undivided attention to carrying out the tasks assigned to me by the JSDF and tried to perform my duties lightly without letting them weigh me down.

—— What is your view of China's forays into the ocean in the future?

Kawano: From the perspective of the Chinese naval strategy, the aim is to control the territory inside the first island chain, and Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Senkaku Islands are obstacles. I think that China's responses to all three are linked, and that we must understand the Chinese strategy in its overall context rather than in isolation. There is no doubt that Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands will be the next focal points.

The Aegis Ashore Problem and Japan's Defense

——Meanwhile, the plans to deploy Aegis Ashore, seen as the ace up the sleeve to defend against missiles from North Korea, have been canceled. Does this not leave a hole in the missile defenses?

Kawano: In 2017, North Korea launched one missile after another until they finally got to a point where a missile launched on a lofted trajectory would have had the capability to reach Washington D.C. Then, on January 1, 2018, the North Koreans switched to a policy of dialog instead of confrontation at the same time as Kim Jong-un, Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea, declared that the country possessed nuclear weapons. In the course of these events, there was a heightened crisis awareness among the Japanese public, and it was argued that Japan's PAC-3 (MIM-104F) and Aegis Ship ballistic missile defense systems lacked readiness. This is when it was decided to deploy Aegis Ashore.

The reason for the cancellation was the undeniable risk of falling booster stages outside the base, but Aegis Ashore would only be deployed if the survival of the nation were at stake. The primary focus is to shoot down missiles, but since there are always advance signs, it would be logical to secure safety by preparing places of refuge and shelters for local residents. The Ministry of Defense (MOD) must honestly and frankly explain the risks to local communities.

At the time, there was a sense that the threat from North Korea was imminent, and with politicians calling for a speedy deployment, the launch sites were selected in a hurry and without proper negotiations to acquire the land. Today, the North Korean missile threat has by no means gone away. Since it is the role of the government to consider Japan's security arrangements from a more elevated standpoint than the public, there is an urgent need to make a decision on how to respond.

——What are the alternatives?

Kawano: It is a difficult problem. Honestly, nothing comes easily to mind. Aegis Ashore is often criticized for a lack of ability to respond to anomalies in missile trajectories, but ballistic missiles are still a threat today and the need to deal with them has not diminished in the slightest. I think it will be possible to respond to different kinds of missiles once Aegis Ashore has undergone further improvements in the future.

——The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has proposed improving deterrence including the ability to attack enemy bases.

Kawano: Aegis Ashore is a purely defensive system. By contrast, the ability to attack enemy bases is to take things a step further, politically speaking, so we would need political power and leadership to move forward. I would like to keep a close watch on any changes.

—— This means that the division of roles where "Japan is the shield, and the United States the sword" would become fluid.

Kawano: Originally, the "sword and shield" was an argument based on the assumption of a Soviet invasion at the time of formulating the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation in 1978. Nowadays when pinpoint accuracy and speed are required to respond to nuclear missiles, the premise has changed considerably. I believe that Japan needs to have its own "sword" when the situation demands and within the scope of the Constitution. But, making this a reality is an issue for the politicians.

——Some people are asking for a review of the missile defenses as well as a review of the National Security Strategy.

Kawano: The National Security Strategy is a totality that includes diplomacy and the economy, so I have no objections to a broad-based discussion. With regard to Japan's defense, in particular, and keeping in mind the changes in the security environment surrounding Japan and the increase in Japan-U.S. operations, I, as someone with long experience of the frontlines, would like to see in-depth discussions from a realistic perspective, not one that excessively ties the hands and feet of the JSDF with an exclusively defense-oriented policy, but one that considers how to improve deterrence, how to shake off an attack should it happen, and so on.

——What are your thoughts on the issues in the medium and long term with regard to improving the roles and capacity of the JSDF?

Kawano: For example, the arguments over the unconstitutionality of the JSDF will likely be resolved if Article 9 of the Constitution is amended to stipulate the JSDF in the future. However, I think it is essential to revise the Self-Defense Forces Act to resolve the various contradictions that the JSDF is currently saddled with. In its current form, the Act is a positive list that prohibits anything that is not identified as a JSDF activity, so legislation is required for every new operation. If it were structured as a negative list that enumerates prohibited activities, it would be possible to respond faster. Either way, defense is a world of common sense and a world of realism. I think we should have this discussion without stepping outside it.

—— In light of this discussion, what are your thoughts on civilian control?

Kawano: Obviously, the actions of the JSDF should be based on civilian control. Ultimately, the responsibility lies with the politicians. Until quite recently, the thinking with regard to civilian control was to keep the JSDF as far as possible away from politics on the assumption that the army operated independently. However, I believe that true civilian control functions in a system where there is always appropriate communication between the government and the JSDF. When I was Admiral, Chief of Staff, Joint Staff, I reported to Prime Minister Abe nearly every week. I believe it is necessary to properly embed civilian control in the true sense, if we are looking at a future of proactively assigning missions to the JSDF.

Interview by Takase Fumihito, editor, *Gaiko* (Diplomacy)

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