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## **Japan's Defense Establishment: A Crisis of Confidence**

by

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Riddled by scandal, incompetence, and plain bad luck, the Japanese defense establishment is in a state of crisis. The public and media backlash to errors at the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and among the uniformed services has left these agencies in a lockdown mode, reticent to produce policies that might further rock the boat. There is now serious concern among Japanese defense planners that their string of misfortunes will derail efforts to enhance the nation's security policy, with potential long-term implications.

Trouble has afflicted Japan's defense establishment from top to bottom and across a range of incidents that have received prominent domestic news coverage. These include the open dispute last year between former Defense Minister Yuriko Koike and Vice Minister Takemasa Moriya over his successor, and the subsequent arrest of Mr. Moriya and his wife for taking bribes from defense contractors. Another embarrassment last year was the allegation that the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) provided misleading information about its controversial refueling mission of coalition vessels in the Indian Ocean.

Adding insult to injury is the latest catastrophe to hit the MSDF. On February 19, one of Japan's flagship Aegis cruisers, the Atago, collided with a fishing vessel off Chiba Prefecture. Two fishermen drowned. Reports suggest that the ship's crew may have been criminally negligent.

The fallout has not stopped there. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which controls the Upper House of the Diet, immediately called for Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba to resign over the accident. Then it was reported that Mr. Ishiba and other top officials gave conflicting accounts of the accident to minimize the political damage. Mr. Ishiba, valued for his expertise in military matters, is likely to remain in the Cabinet for the time being but he has become the target of choice for the DPJ.

Meanwhile, public opinion is souring. In a December 2007 *Asahi Shimbun* poll, 65 percent of respondents said they were unsatisfied with the way the government handled the Moriya scandal. That has helped drag down the Fukuda Cabinet's overall approval rating, which has fallen to 31 percent according to a February 2008 *Nikkei Shimbun* poll.

What is more discouraging is public antipathy toward the MOD and the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in general. Japanese mainstream society, which still harbors a strain of postwar anti-militarism, has never fully embraced the SDF. Just 37 percent of Japanese have a favorable opinion of their armed forces according to a Cabinet Office poll taken in 2006 (the only time the Cabinet Office has conducted such a poll). Another poll, jointly conducted in December 2007 by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* and Gallup, found that just 38 percent of Japanese “trust” the SDF, compared to 78 percent of Americans who trust their military services.

Nor do Japanese place much value in the SDF’s most prominent foreign deployment: the Indian Ocean refueling mission. It is well known that public support for a revised law to permit the dispatch was roughly split down the middle. But, according to an *Asahi Shimbun* poll, just half of the respondents think a withdrawal of the MSDF mission would have any adverse effect on the nation’s international standing anyway; 37 percent believe there would be no impact at all.

The latest incidents only reinforce the public’s longstanding ambivalence toward the nation’s defense agencies. The pervasive perception is that the MOD and SDF are either corrupt, inept, or dangerously unaccountable to outside scrutiny (or all three).

Such criticism is to be expected from the left, such as the *Asahi Shimbun*, which calls the government’s handling of the Atago accident no less than “an event that puts Japanese democracy to the test.” Yet even the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, usually a more sympathetic proponent of the military, has warned that: “Restoring public trust will be indispensable if the government wishes to devise the nation’s new security policy and put it into practice.”

Indeed, public support is essential if Japanese policymakers are to enhance the nation’s defense capabilities and role in international security affairs. One critical issue is the acquisition and procurement of an expensive laundry list of advanced military hardware—such as expanded ballistic missile defense systems, next-generation fighter aircraft and a new fleet of naval vessels—that are needed to upgrade the nation’s defenses.

Paying for all this will be a trick, especially given Japan’s long-held limitation on defense spending to one percent of the GDP. Raising the one percent ceiling has been unacceptable to the Japanese public throughout most of the postwar period. Now, due to the recent fiascos, the hill is much steeper for those who want to persuade voters to approve higher expenditures on military items.

Widespread public skepticism toward the military may also dampen prospects for Japan to play an enhanced role in international security operations, such as UN Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) and the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.

A proposed general law that would streamline the legislative process for such operations is now in jeopardy of being watered down or shelved. MOD officials say, off the record, that the Atago accident torpedoed chances of the Ministry producing a bill anytime soon.

Public support for the general law is tepid anyway. According to a January *Nikkei Shimbun* poll, 35 percent support the general law, while 46 percent of respondents oppose it (19 percent did not respond or have an opinion)—not encouraging numbers for a politically divisive bill that will need broad public approval to be passed.

The intense media and public scrutiny has had a further effect of undermining morale across Japan's defense-related agencies. Contrition rather than pride of service pervades the uniformed ranks. Officers in the MSDF say they face a pay cut as punishment for their branch's misfortunes. That cannot help morale. Low pay is already to blame for reports that some SDF units have a suicide rate three times the national average.

There is no single way out of the general malaise affecting Japan's defense establishment, but some steps must be taken at a bare minimum. A self-imposed moratorium on embarrassing scandals at the MOD and SDF would no doubt help ease public concerns about their competence. So too would a bureaucratic culture of transparency and accountability.

But for the outside observer, it seems clear that the political culture of Japan must change as well. Public scrutiny of the defense agencies is on the whole inordinately high for a nation that yearns for normalcy. Not every bureaucratic bungle at the MOD or SDF signifies a march back to military rule—these are problems endemic to any government. Nor should these agencies be on the political defensive at the expense of policymaking.

There are legitimate public concerns about the competence and professionalism of Japan's armed forces and civilian leadership at the MOD. But the current level of scrutiny is limiting real policy options and holding back progress in key legislation aimed at giving Japan an expanded role in international security activities. Some balance must be struck, as Japan's security policy cannot afford to stay on hold indefinitely.

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