



UN Operations in Africa Provide a Mechanism for Japan's Military Normalization Agenda

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Published: January 7, 2014

The recent deterioration of the security situation in South Sudan and the UN Security Council's decision to double the number of peacekeepers in the country to 12,500 troops have placed Japan's contribution to the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) in sharp focus.¹ The increase in violence, ongoing threats to civilians, and the death of two Indian peacekeepers clearly challenge Japanese peacekeepers' limited and complicated rules of engagement.² But the crisis also provides Prime Minister Shinzo Abe with a unique opportunity to further erode the country's pacifist constitution, as evidenced by his recent decision to resupply South Korean peacekeepers with ammunition.³

Abe is certainly not the first Japanese prime minister to leverage African security operations as a mechanism for advancing military normalization. In 2009, Taro Aso, now Abe's deputy prime minister, committed Japanese military assets to multinational counterpiracy operations off the coast of Somalia. Armed with a series of UN Security Council resolutions, Aso pushed through an antipiracy law that marked a fundamental reinterpretation of the "maritime police actions" clause of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces Act.⁴ This

provided the legal basis for the Japanese military to escort foreign ships and employ deadly force as part of global counterpiracy operations.

Aso's successor, Yukio Hatoyama, went even further. He expanded Japan's military presence in the region by establishing a \$40 million base in Djibouti for the Maritime Self-Defense Force, which is Japan's first semi-permanent overseas military base since World War II. The passage of a bill in late 2013 under the Abe administration that authorizes armed guards on Japanese flagged civilian ships—a departure from

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¹ "UN to Send More Troops to South Sudan," Al Jazeera, December 26, 2013.

² Michael Edward Walsh and Jeremy Taylor, "Time to Reconsider the Japanese Peacekeeping Mission in South Sudan," African Arguments, web log, December 23, 2013.

³ "Japan to Supply Ammunition to South Korea," *China Post*, December 24, 2013.

⁴ The UN resolutions on piracy are available from the UN Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, http://www.un.org/Depts/los/piracy/piracy_documents.htm. See also "Anti-piracy Law," *Japan Times*, June 23, 2009.

long-standing legislation that prevented private citizens from carrying or using firearms—is just the latest step in the process.⁵ The legislation went through the Diet with the support of both the ruling and opposition parties.

Abe also benefits from the fact that he inherited UNMISS from past administrations. Following the antipiracy deployment in the Horn of Africa, Hatoyama ordered the deployment of Japanese peacekeepers to South Sudan. His immediate successors—Naoto Kan and Yoshihiko Noda—followed through on that commitment because it reflected Japan’s long-standing support for human security as a central pillar of official development-assistance policies in Africa and reinforced their desire to have the country recognized as a major player on the world stage. Abe’s decision to expand the Japanese engineering contingent in South Sudan and his speech before the UN General Assembly were logical extensions of these prior commitments.⁶ Moreover, they gave Abe the platform to commit Japan to serving as a “proactive Contributor to Peace...even more actively engaged in UN collective security measures, including peacekeeping operations.”⁷ Backing out of UNMISS would therefore raise doubts about more than just Abe’s credibility; it would also bring into question the credibility of prior administrations and their portrayal of Japan as a reliable partner on international security.

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For these reasons, UN-sanctioned operations in East Africa continue to provide Abe with a distinct political advantage in pushing forward military normalization measures. The product of the policy decisions of five separate administrations, these missions remain difficult to politicize given that the two dominant parties have endorsed them. Furthermore, until very recently, there has been little domestic or international opposition to the incremental changes made to Japan’s security laws in the name of these operations. Thus, even though the crisis in South Sudan poses a serious political, diplomatic, and military challenge for his government, Abe is unlikely to withdraw Japanese forces from UNMISS in response to the current levels of violence. The mission is simply too valuable as a mechanism for advancing a “normal” state with a “normal” military through “proactive pacifism.”

The Abe administration, however, must be careful. Japan’s military remains far from normal and is ill prepared to tackle many serious contingencies requiring the use of deadly force. This is because Japanese peacekeepers are still required to operate in terms of the limiting five principles of the peacekeeping law. The law prohibits Japanese Self-Defense Forces from participating in the collective defense of both their fellow UNMISS peacekeepers and South Sudanese civilians, even though the protection of civilians is a central tenet of the UNMISS mandate. While Abe has already made it known that he wants to push through new collective-defense legislation to redress this limitation, he has yet to do so. This makes it impossible for Japanese peacekeepers to accept the full weight of modern peacekeeping operations.

The Abe administration must also be sensitive to the reality that not everyone is ready to embrace its moves to normalize Japan’s military. The recent controversy over Japan’s decision to resupply South Korean peacekeepers with ammunition serves as a case in point. For Abe, the decision provided an opportunity to

⁵ See “Armed Guards Allowed Aboard French, Japanese Ships,” MarineLink.com, December 5, 2013; Mark Alleman, “The Japanese Firearm and Sword Possession Control Law: Translator’s Introduction,” *Pacific Rim Law & Policy* (2000): 165–74; and “Ships Can Carry Armed Guards against Pirates,” *Japan Times*, November 13, 2013.

⁶ Shinzo Abe, “Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, at the Sixty-Eighth Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations,” Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, September 26, 2013, http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/96_abe/statement/201309/26generaldebate_e.html.

⁷ Abe, “Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, at the Sixty-Eighth Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations.”

challenge the long-standing arms embargo restricting the sale and distribution of weapons. Japan's National Security Council, in setting aside the "three rules on arms exports" and the official interpretation of the peace cooperation law, created a valuable precedent for future exceptions or changes to the arms-export law. But this move also provoked an angry response from South Korea. After domestic media accused the South Korean government of "tacitly consenting" to "Abe's move to expand the role of the Self-Defense Forces," South Korean officials publicly chastised Japanese officials for politicizing the exchange.⁸ A decision to return the ammunition soon followed.

Japan faces an even more serious challenge with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Steadily deteriorating relations and a territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands (also known as the Diaoyu Islands in the PRC and the Diaoyutai Islands in Taiwan) have escalated tensions between these great powers. The question of Japan's military normalization is often at the center of the rhetoric that characterizes Sino-Japanese relations. This makes Beijing particularly sensitive toward any developments that advance Japan's military normalization agenda.⁹

The South Korean case illustrates an important point. Japan's ability to advance its military normalization agenda through African peacekeeping operations is not without political limits. To date, Japanese security operations in East Africa have enabled incremental changes that have moved Japan closer to collective defense in peacekeeping and the adoption of broader rules of engagement in military operations overseas. In the future, these peacekeeping operations might very well serve as a precedent for Japan to justify collective defense of a U.S. warship under attack in the Pacific—an explicit goal of the Abe administration. For this reason

alone, Japanese peacekeeping in East Africa remains a significant element in Abe's "historical mission" to amend the constitution. The question remains whether this process has reached a tipping point from which the normalization of Japan's military is now the only outcome. ~

The views expressed are those of the authors.

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⁸ "South Korea to Return Ammunition Provided by Japan," *Japan Times*, December 27, 2013, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/12/27/national/south-korea-to-return-ammunition-provided-by-japan>.

⁹ "China Concerned about Japan's Army Building Up," *China Daily*, September 14, 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-09/14/content_16969567.htm.

