

Bomb by Bomb, Japan Sheds Military Restraints

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New York Times

Published: July 23, 2007

ANDERSEN AIR FORCE BASE, Guam — To take part in its annual exercises with the United States Air Force here last month, Japan practiced dropping 500-pound live bombs on Farallon de Medinilla, a tiny island in the western Pacific's turquoise waters more than 150 miles north of here.

The pilots described dropping a live bomb for the first time — shouting “shack!” to signal a direct hit — and seeing the fireball from aloft.

“The level of tension was just different,” said Capt. Tetsuya Nagata, 35, stepping down from his cockpit onto the sunbaked tarmac.

The exercise would have been unremarkable for almost any other military, but it was highly significant for Japan, a country still restrained by a Constitution that renounces war and allows forces only for its defense. Dropping live bombs on land had long been considered too offensive, so much so that Japan does not have a single live-bombing range.

Flying directly from Japan and practicing live-bombing runs on distant foreign soil would have been regarded as unacceptably provocative because the implicit message was clear: these fighter jets could perhaps fly to North Korea and take out some targets before returning home safely.

But from here in Micronesia to Iraq, Japan's military has been rapidly crossing out items from its list of can't-dos. The incremental changes, especially since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, amount to the most significant transformation in Japan's military since World War II, one that has brought it ever closer operationally to America's military while rattling nerves throughout northeast Asia.

In a little over half a decade, Japan's military has carried out changes considered unthinkable a few years back. In the Indian Ocean, Japanese destroyers and refuelling ships are helping American and other militaries fight in Afghanistan. In Iraq, Japanese planes are transporting cargo and American troops to Baghdad from Kuwait.

Japan is acquiring weapons that blur the lines between defensive and offensive. For the Guam bombing run, Japan deployed its newest fighter jets, the F-2's, the first developed jointly by Japan and the United States, on their maiden trip here. Unlike its older jets, the F-2's were able to fly the 1,700 miles from northern Japan to Guam without refuelling — a “straight shot,” as the Japanese said with unconcealed pride.

Japan recently indicated strongly its desire to buy the F-22 Raptor, a stealth fighter known mainly for its offensive abilities such as penetrating contested airspace and destroying enemy targets, whose export is prohibited by United States law.

At home, the Defense Agency, whose profile had been intentionally kept low, became a full ministry this year. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe used the parliamentary majority he inherited from his wildly popular predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, to ram through a law that could lead to a revision of the pacifist Constitution.

Japan's 241,000-member military, though smaller than those of its neighbours, is considered Asia's most sophisticated. Though flat, its \$40 billion military budget has ranked among the world's top five in recent years. Japan has also tapped non-military budgets to launch spy satellites and strengthen its coast guard recently.

Japanese politicians like Mr. Abe have justified the military's transformation by seizing on the threat from North Korea; the rise of China, whose annual military budget has been growing by double digits; and the Sept. 11 attacks — even fanning those threats, critics say. At the same time, Mr. Abe has tried to rehabilitate the reputation of Japan's imperial forces by whitewashing their crimes, including wartime sexual slavery.

Japanese critics say the changes under way — whose details the government has tried to hide from public view, especially the missions in Iraq — have already violated the Constitution and other defence restrictions.

“The reality has already moved ahead, so they will now talk about the need to catch up and revise the Constitution,” said Yukio Hatoyama, the secretary general of the main opposition Democratic Party.

Richard J. Samuels, a Japan expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said that revisionist politicians like Mr. Abe and Mr. Koizumi, once on the fringes of Japan's political world, succeeded in grabbing the mainstream in a time of uncertainty. They shared the view “that the statute of limitations on Japan's misbehaviour during the Pacific War had expired” and that Japan, like any normal country, should have a military.

Their predecessors feared getting entangled in an American-led war. But the new leaders feared that Japan would be abandoned by the United States unless it contributed to its wars, said Mr. Samuels, whose book on Japan's changing military, “Securing Japan,” will be published in August.

“So what do you do?” he said. “You step up. And that is consistent with what they've long wanted to do anyway. So there was a convergence of preferences.”

Today, Japan is America's biggest partner in developing and financing a missile defence shield in Asia. Some Japanese ground and air force commands are also moving inside American bases in Japan so that the two forces will become, in military jargon, "interoperable."

"I think the Japan-U.S. security relationship should be as unified as possible, and our different roles need to be made clear," said Shigeru Ishiba, a defence chief under Mr. Koizumi and now a leader in a Liberal Democratic Party committee looking at loosening defence restrictions.

In Iraq, in accordance with a special law to aid in reconstruction, a symbolic ground force was first deployed to a relatively peaceful, non-combat area in southern Iraq to engage in relief activities. After the troops left last year, though, three Japanese planes began regularly transporting American troops and cargo from Kuwait to Baghdad.

The Japanese authorities refuse to say whether the planes have transported weapons besides those carried by soldiers. Concerned about public opposition, defence officers have spied on antiwar activists and journalists perceived as critical, the Defense Ministry acknowledged after incriminating documents were recently obtained by the Communist Party in Japan.

Mr. Hatoyama of the Democratic Party said that transporting armed American troops contravened Japan's pacifist Constitution.

"Instead of engaging in humanitarian assistance, they are basically assisting American troops," he said. "American troops and the Air Self-Defense Forces are working as one, just as they are training as one in Guam."

In Parliament, Mr. Abe denied that the activities violated the Constitution, saying Japanese troops were restricted to noncombat zones and did not operate under a joint command with any other force.

Here in Guam, American and Japanese pilots simulated intercepts and air-to-air combat for two weeks. In the final days, each side took turns pummeling the tiny island with bombs.

Col. Tatsuya Arima, the commander of the Japanese squadron, said such bombing could protect Japanese ground troops or vessels from encroaching enemies.

"Bombing does not always mean offensive weapons," Colonel Arima said. "They can also be used for defence, which, put another way, is what we mostly train for."

Lt. Col. Tod Fingal, the commander of the American squadron, said the exercise helped build confidence among pilots by exposing them to a new environment.

"I would equate it to an away game in sports," Colonel Fingal said.

Japan's military has become less shy in projecting its power away from home. Japan lacks the nuclear submarines, long-range missiles or large aircraft carriers that amount to real power projection.

But it is acquiring four Boeing 767 air tankers that will allow its planes to refuel in midair and travel farther, as well as two aircraft carriers that will transport helicopters and, with some adjustments, planes capable of taking off vertically. The United States has welcomed the changes while pressing for more.

"The restrictions that Japan has lived under, which I would say Japan has maintained on its own or imposed on itself, are quite unique," said a Pentagon official who requested anonymity so that he could speak candidly. "The changes that you're seeing in Japan are very unique changes in the context of those restrictions. In the context of everything else that is going on around the world, or in the context of Japan's potential to contribute to the region and the world in security areas, the changes are fairly small."

Small or not, they are causing anxieties in a region where distrust of Japan has deepened in direct proportion to Japanese tendencies to revise the past. South Korea reacted sharply to Japan's desire to buy the F-22 Raptor. Also, in a recent ceremony unveiling South Korea's first destroyer equipped with the advanced Aegis weapons system, President Roh Moo-hyun said, "Northeast Asia is still in an arms race, and we cannot just sit back and watch."

Mr. Ishiba, the former defence chief, said the region's distrust was softened by Japan's alliance with the United States. But he acknowledged that Japan's inability to come to terms with its wartime past restricted its ability to project power positively.

"Unless everyone understands why we weren't able to avoid that war," Mr. Ishiba said, referring to World War II, "and what Japan did to Asia, it could be dangerous if we get power-projection capability."