

Briefing Memo

Controversies over Japan's Defense Policy in the Détente Era

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Introduction: Détente and the Emergence of the “Basic Defense Force Concept”

Tensions between the east and the west during the Cold War were on the brink of a nuclear war at the beginning of the 1960s during the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1962). After that, however, the United States and the Soviet Union found common interests in preventing the outbreak of a nuclear war, which then led into the era of détente (easing of tensions). The first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT-I) commenced from November 1969 (the provisional agreement SALT-I was concluded in May 1972), while SALT-II commenced from November 1972. In July 1971, U.S. President Nixon's visit to China was announced, paving the way to a reconciliation between the U. S. and China. With regard to the Vietnam War as well, the Paris Peace Accords were concluded in January 1973, and the U.S. Forces in Vietnam were withdrawn in March the same year.

The Détente also brought about changes to Japan's security policy. On October 29, 1976, the first National Defense Program Outline (1976 NDPO, *Boei Keikaku no Taiko* or *Boei Taiko*) were drawn up, and the “Basic Defense Force Concept” (*Kibanteki Boeiryoku Koso*) was introduced as Japan's approach to defense capability. The 1976 NDPO set out the following key points with regard to Japan's defense capability: “The possession of the assorted functions required for national defense, while retaining balanced organization and deployment, including logistical support;” “Japan will repel limited and small-scale aggression, in principle, without external assistance;” “At this time, the present scale of defense capability seems to closely approach target goals of the above-mentioned concept;” and, Japan's defense concept “will be standardized so that, when serious changes in situation demand, the defense structure can be smoothly adapted to meet such changes.” This is known as the Basic Defense Force Concept (however, the expression “basic defense force” was not used in the actual text of the 1976 NDPO, but rather, by Michita Sakata, Director General of the (then) Defense Agency, in his remark published on the same day that the 1976 NDPO were announced).

This was often depicted as an opposition between the traditional “counter-threat theory” (*kyoi taiko ron*) and “beyond-the-threat theory” (*datsu kyoi ron*), and a shift from the former to the latter. The “counter-threat theory” is a natural concept in the sense of determining the defense capability on one's own side in response to a threat, and increasing that defense capability as the threat grows. Beyond-the-threat theory, on the other hand, is a considerably bold defense concept that is founded upon the separation of threat from the defense capability that a country should possess. In the viewpoints taken so far, defense official Takuya Kubo penned the so-called “KB personal paper” during his term as the Director of the Defense Bureau from February 1971 and June 1974 (“Concept for Japan's Defense Build-up” (*Boeiryoku Seibi no Kangaekata*) and “A Framework to Consider the Arrangement of Japan's Defense Capabilities” (*Waga Kuni no Boei Koso to Boeiryoku Seibi no Kangaekata*). Furthermore, after Kubo wrote

the Defense Agency's views on "Defense Force in Peacetime" (*Heiwa Ji no Boeiryouku*) in February 1973, the "Kubo Concept" of beyond-the-threat theory, which is posited as an antithesis to the traditional defense concept of the counter-threat theory, won the support of Director General Sakata and was thereafter incorporated as the Basic Defense Force Concept in the 1976 NDPO.

With regard to the controversies over Japan's defense policy during the Détente era, instead of taking the view of counter-threat theory against beyond-the-threat theory and the transition from the former to the latter, this paper seeks to repaint it as a process in which these ultimately coexist under the Basic Defense Force Concept, based on historical materials and oral histories by the relevant personnel that have become available in recent years.

"Beyond-the-Threat Theory" and "Counter Low-Threat Theory"

At the start of the 1970s, for reasons such as the international Détente and economic downturn in Japan, it became difficult to formulate the traditional long-term defense build-up plan based on the "Required Defense Force Concept" (*Shoyo Boeiryouku Koso*), which is the counter-threat theory. As a result, it became impossible to set out an outlook for the security policy after the 4th Defense Build-up Plan (4th DBP) that would end in FY1976.

In light of that, Kubo proposed the formulation of a new defense concept that would contribute to resolving post-4th DBP issues. The Kubo Concept, which was compiled from 1971 to 1974, took as its starting point the recognition that the traditional counter-threat theory had collapsed. On top of that, rather than aiming for the build-up of a defense force for which there were no realistic prospects of achieving, Kubo asserted, from the perspective of military rationality and political appropriateness, that the country should possess a complete defense force that could function as a resistant force, or in other words, possess various defense functions, have functional and geographical balance, be able to cope with limited warfare as a possible threat without external assistance, and be expandable in times of tension. According to Kubo, Japan already possessed such a defense force in terms of scale. The Defense Agency's views on "Defense Force in Peacetime," released at a meeting of the Budget Committee of the House of Representatives in February 1973, established that the defense capability Japan needed during peacetime should be equipped with the basic functions and organizations needed for the defense of Japan, be an effective defense force with no gaps in military deployment, have modernized equipment, and maintain a strong logistical support posture. It should be able to exert the most efficient defense capability under the given conditions. This stance reflected the Kubo Concept.

Thereafter, however, the Defense Agency's views on "Defense Force in Peacetime" were withdrawn, and support for the Kubo Concept presented in the KB personal paper was not necessarily widespread within the Defense Agency. On the other hand, the "N Study Group" was established in the Defense Agency from around autumn 1974 to review the post-4th DBP issues. Based on the reviews undertaken by the "N Study Group," Haruo Natsume, Director of the Defense Division, came up with the concept of a "Constantly Maintained Defense Force" (*Jobi Subeki Boeiryouku*) based on an inability to accept beyond-the-threat theory despite the end of the traditional counter-threat theory. This Constantly Maintained Defense Force Concept was also expressed as a "required defense force concept for limited threats," and could be described as a counter low-threat theory.

However, Sakata, who was understanding toward the Kubo Concept, was appointed as the Director General of

the Defense Agency in December 1974. From summer to autumn of 1975, Kubo himself was appointed as Administrative Vice-Minister of the Defense Agency, and the Kubo Concept gained greater influence in the Agency, as demonstrated by the publication of a report by Sakata's private advisory board, "Committee to Study Defense" (*Boei wo Kangaeru Kai*), that took a pro-Kubo Concept viewpoint.

"Validation Theory"

After that, Seiki Nishihiro, who became the Director of the Defense Division in the autumn of 1975, adopted a pragmatic approach in contrast with Kubo's theoretical approach toward the post-4th DBP problem. Nishihiro racked his brains over the ideological question of whether to adopt beyond-the-threat theory or the counter-threat theory, and was intent on coming up with a new method of developing defense capability apart from the traditional approaches of formulating a five-year plan or single-year plan. In this respect, he came up with the concept of taking the direction of establishing the NDPO in place of a five-year plan. Nishihiro and others such as Ko Maruyama, Director of the Defense Bureau, were observed to have used the Basic Defense Force Concept as justification for making the transition to the NDPO approach. According to testimonies by the relevant parties, the idea of protecting the scale of the existing defense force from the liberal administration of Takeo Miki had also apparently been at work here.

The "Second Director General's Order" concerning the preparation of the post-4th DBP, issued in October 1975 immediately after the appointment of Nishihiro as Director of the Defense Division, expressed that the traditional counter-threat theory would no longer be applied in the future. However, this order also used the expression "basic" on the new defense concept, as well as the expression "constantly maintained defense force" that had originated from the N Study Group. From around this time, inconsistencies began to develop in the interpretation of the Basic Defense Force Concept among the relevant parties. Nishihiro described the "basic defense force" as a "character" or "substantial entity" of a "constantly maintained defense force;" on the other hand, Kubo considered the two to be separate entities. Furthermore, in a series of discussions, Kubo made remarks that gave those around him the impression that he acknowledged back-pedaling on his own assertions, from beyond-the-threat theory to counter low-threat theory. After that, however, Kubo returned to his own theory in the draft of the FY1976 edition of *the Defense White Paper*, which sought to explain the Basic Defense Force Concept to the people of Japan, giving rise to disagreements with others such as the uniformed personnel of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) armed forces who viewed this concept as a counter low-threat theory. In the end, Kubo made a verbal gaffe concerning the Lockheed scandal, and departed from the Defense Agency in the summer of 1976 without involvement in the final stages of the process of compiling the 1976 NDPO. The work of formulating the NDPO began in earnest under the leadership of the Defense Division; it was drafted by the Secretariat of the National Defense Council, and after discussions within the National Defense Council, was officially drawn up as the 1976 NDPO in autumn the same year.

If we were to verify if the Basic Defense Force Concept were beyond-the-threat theory or counter low-threat theory based on the official 1976 NDPO and the related official documents, we would see that expressions related to beyond-the-threat theory are used in the FY1977 edition of *the Defense White Paper*, for example, which states, in reference to the Basic Defense Force Concept, that the approach centers on quantitatively assessing defense

capability based on peacetime defense preparedness. On the other hand, there are also descriptions that are related to counter-threat theory, such as “Obviously, any defense system which disregards external threat is inherently untenable.” In reality, there were efforts to adjust between beyond-the-threat theory and counter low-threat theory when introducing the Basic Defense Force Concept, through the “Validation Theory” (*Kensho Ron*) based on Nishihiro’s idea. The validation theory is based on the logic that if defense capability derived from beyond-the-threat theory were to be validated on the basis of whether it can counter low threats, the result would be that yes, it can counter such threats. Accordingly, we could say that the Basic Defense Force Concept can be interpreted both as beyond-the-threat theory and counter-threat theory.

In reality, the Kubo Concept, which was described as a beyond-the-threat theory, did not fully become a perfect beyond-the-threat theory, strictly speaking. This is because the Kubo Concept sets out the assumptions of threats that, despite being small, have to be dealt with by Japan without external assistance. These include threats such as limited warfare, indirect aggression, and surprise attacks. If the emphasis were placed on “limited and small-scale” within the concept of “repelling limited and small-scale aggression without external assistance,” which is one of the components of the Basic Defense Force Concept, it could indeed be interpreted as the opposite of the Required Defense Force Concept, including the unilateral assumption of such a situation. However, if the emphasis were to be placed on “repelling aggression (without external assistance),” it would be a form of counter-threat theory. In fact, at an extraordinary meeting of the councilors of the Defense Agency held on May 6, 1977 after the formulation of the 1976 NDPO, Director for International Affairs Hirohiko Otsuka pointed out that the case of a small-scale and limited aggression could not be explained by beyond-the-threat theory, it could only be explained by counter-threat theory. Hence, because of the incomplete nature of beyond-the-threat theory, we could say that in the Validation Theory, the concept of repelling limited and small-scale aggression without any external assistance serves as a “bridge” linking beyond-the-threat theory and counter low-threat theory.

It is often misunderstood, but the concept of repelling limited and small-scale aggression without external assistance did not refer to the SDF coping with limited and small-scale aggression without external assistance in the operational sense; rather, it was a concept for defense build-up in order to ensure that we would, in future, have the degree of defense capability to enable us to cope with limited and small-scale aggression at the very least without external assistance (accordingly, this does not contradict with joint action by Japan and the U.S. at the operational level). This is probably consistent with the fact that the Validation Theory separates the concept of repelling limited and small-scale aggression without external assistance from the probability of the situation.

Controversies after the Formulation of the 1976 NDPO

After the formulation of the 1976 NDPO, beyond-the-threat theory interpretation of the Basic Defense Force Concept began to spread through the 1977 edition of *the Defense White Paper* and Kubo’s explanation on the journal of *Kokubo* (National Defense). On the other hand, there were also people, particularly uniformed personnel of the SDF, who were not satisfied with this.

According to the minutes of the extraordinary meeting of the councilors of the Defense Agency held on May 6, 1977, Teiji Nakamura, Chief of Staff of the Maritime SDF, argued that the NDPO were published without a

consensus being reached (on whether it was beyond-the-threat or counter-threat). In response to this argument, Vice-Minister Maruyama declared that the NDPO is necessarily and fundamentally not beyond-the-threat. Even after more than half a year had passed since the formulation of the 1976 NDPO, the core figures of the Defense Agency were discussing whether to take a peacetime approach or a counter-threat approach as the approach to determining defense force (Councilor in the Director-General's Secretariat Haruo Natsume). In reality, during the formulation of the 1976 NDPO, Director General Sakata had announced that *rather than resisting a specific threat*, the emphasis was put on adopting a precautionary posture during peacetime based on the premise of regional stability and balance between countries (italics by the author). In response to this beyond-the-threat theory explanation of the Basic Defense Force Concept, the uniformed personnel who stood by counter-threat theory interpretation were unhappy. Documents related to Noboru Hoshuyama (former Director General of the Defense Facilities Administration Agency), archived in the Modern Japanese Political History Materials Room of the National Diet Library, Japan, include historical materials concerning the views of the respective Staff Offices, compiled in the year following the formulation of the 1976 NDPO. These materials stated that the external briefing materials of speeches delivered by the Director General during the formulation of the NDPO, stating that “quantity is not linked to threats,” are *the result of the unilateral misjudgment by the Inner Bureau, and do not concern the Staff Offices* (italics by the author).

These show that the differences between beyond-the-threat theory interpretation and counter low-threat theory interpretation of the Basic Defense Force Concept were not resolved even after the formulation of the 1976 NDPO.

Conclusion: Multiple Interpretations of the Basic Defense Force Concept

Until now, the Basic Defense Force Concept had often been explained as the direct result of the Kubo Concept that became manifest in the 1976 NDPO. However, from the time after Kubo proposed the Basic Defense Force Concept as his personal idea, to the point when the government officially formulated the Basic Defense Force Concept, there are those who view the Kubo Concept as an “invention” prior to its commercialization, as well as others who deem that the Kubo Concept as “adapted” for counter low-threat theory and then named to counter low-threat theory. In short, the “Kubo-centered historical view” to date had to be captured and understood relatively. Beyond-the-threat theory ended in an incomplete manner.

In the process of the development of the Basic Defense Force Concept, multiple interpretations emerged and coexisted with one another. These included beyond-the-threat theory interpretation based on the Kubo Concept, counter low-threat theory interpretation such as the Constantly Maintained Defense Force (referring to the required defense force concept of limited threat) that had originated from the N Study Group, and Nishihiro's Validation Theory interpretation that linked these two interpretations. Yasutomo Mitsui, who was involved in the formulation of the 1976 NDPO as a member of the Defense Division, said that from an extreme point of view, if there were ten people, there would be ten different interpretations of the Basic Defense Force Concept. This is not unrelated to the problem of how the Basic Defense Force Concept confronted its own opposing theories in the Second Cold War era.

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