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Defense cooperation guidelines with U.S. present new roles, risks for Japan

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The new Japan-U.S. defense guidelines approved Monday will transform the nature of the Self-Defense Forces' overseas operations, eliminating geographical limits on the nation's military cooperation with U.S. forces.

The changes have divided security analysts in Japan. Some fear the country could be dragged into a conflict overseas involving an ally, presumably the U.S. military.

Others welcome what amounts to a war manual, saying the guidelines are well designed to reflect the growing role of the Japan-U.S. military alliance in the face of grave security issues in the Asia-Pacific and elsewhere.

"There is one clause that will significantly change the nature of SDF activities," said Kyoji Yanagisawa, who has served as assistant chief Cabinet secretary in charge of crisis management. He was referring to an article that deals with mutual asset protection of the SDF and the U.S. military.

The asset protection article means the SDF would be obliged to defend the U.S. military if the U.S. is under attack by a third party, potentially dragging Japan into the conflict, Yanagisawa said. This would be a departure from the previous posture of Japan's forces, which had been limited to defense.

For instance, the guidelines permit Japan to assist the U.S. military in hostilities in the Middle East or the South China Sea, media reports said.

The revised guidelines would allow the SDF to protect U.S. warships whether during times of peace or during a grave crisis that would threaten the "survival" of Japan, said Yanagisawa, a former Defense Ministry official.

The bilateral guidelines set forth general roles for the SDF and the U.S. military in joint operations.

They come at a time when the administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is preparing new security legislation to expand the range of SDF operations, including those involving collective self-defense, which had long been banned under the Constitution.

The postwar Constitution had been interpreted as allowing Japan only to respond when the country is directly attacked by another country. That strict, defense-only posture was widely regarded a symbol of the nation's postwar pacifism.

But Abe, discarding the previous official interpretation, now argues Japan can use the right of collective self-defense, meaning Japan could strike another country if an allied state is under attack and it poses a critical security threat to Japan.

Abe's new interpretation has drawn flak from many liberal, left-leaning intellectuals, who fear Japan may shed its pacifist-posture forever and start more actively engaging in U.S.-led military operations anywhere in the world.

But other experts say the revised guidelines are only designed to reflect the already expanded roles of the Japan-U.S. military alliance.

The 1997 guidelines mainly focused on the defense of Japan and emergencies in nearby regions, presumably around the Korean Peninsula.

The new guidelines have eliminated geographic restrictions for joint missions, reflecting the “global nature” of the bilateral alliance and “seamlessly ensuring Japan’s peace and security.”

The new text also declares that Japan and the U.S. will work for peace and security in “the Asia-Pacific region and beyond” in such areas as peacekeeping operations, maritime security and logistic support.

“The Alliance will respond to situations that will have an important influence on Japan’s peace and security. Such situations cannot be defined geographically,” the new document said.

Noboru Yamaguchi, a former Ground Self-Defense Force lieutenant general and current professor at the International University of Japan, said the revised guidelines give more detailed rules by which Japan-U.S. joint operations can contribute to regional and international peace and stability, compared with previous guidelines.

The guidelines thus reflect the will of the bilateral alliance to play a more active role in the international community without geographic limitations, Yamaguchi said.

The two countries have also agreed to launch a “standing Alliance Coordination Mechanism,” which will enable them to “enhance operational coordination, and strengthen bilateral planning . . . in all phases from peacetime to contingencies,” the revised guidelines state.

Yanagisawa said it is natural for Tokyo and Washington to prepare such a mechanism since their forces set out to operate together in peacetime and other situations.

In recent months, the LDP-Komeito ruling camp has engaged in talks to draft new bills to cope with various security contingencies “seamlessly” in accordance with the revised U.S.-Japan defense guidelines.

Operations involving Japan’s use of the right to self-collective defense are assumed to include mine-sweeping operations in international sea lanes and the interception of ballistic missiles.

Takashi Kawakami, a professor of security issues at Takushoku University, said the proposed security legislation would help raise Japan’s deterrent capabilities, which aim to allow for a “seamless” response to various contingencies.

But Kawakami also said Tokyo must seriously consider its national interests in deploying the SDF, given its limited military resources, including personnel and funds.

“Discussion is necessary regarding the question of how much is enough” when it comes to the expanded scope of SDF activities, Kawakami said.

Japan should consider how it can turn down proposals from the United States if they are not in Japan’s interests, and how much Japan can cooperate with the U.S. given its limited defense assets, he said.