

Combat-Related Death of Soldiers and Public Support for Military Missions Abroad: The Case of Japan

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Abstract

How will the Japanese public react to the first combat-related death in the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) on a military mission abroad? Given the fact that Japan has experienced no such casualty as yet, it is not difficult to imagine the public's initial shock and panic about the loss. Will the Japanese public, however, be able to continue to support JSDF deployments despite their human cost? This article analyzes applicable social learning theories to examine whether and to what extent Japan is ready to accept combat-related deaths and—despite them—to continue to support further missions away from home.

Current opportunities for the public to discuss, understand, and accept (or reject) the threat of JSDF combat casualties are limited. The public's understanding of the legitimacy of their military missions and of combat-related deaths remains inadequate, stalling social learning in this area across Japan. Under these circumstances, the chance for continuing public support for military missions will be slim once the JSDF suffers its first casualty in combat. Japan faces serious and urgent needs for more adequate and profound discourse among the public and between state authorities over what it means to lose JSDF troops' lives. Failure in these efforts will jeopardize the very legitimacy of Japanese military missions abroad and threaten the loss of support for Japanese contributions to international peace.

Introduction

While a total of 1,964 soldiers in the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) have lost their lives in training accidents or to suicide to date, Japan has yet to experience combat-related casualties during its foreign missions, including United Nations Peacekeeping operations (UNPKO) and other peace support operations. However, legal reforms in 2015 expanded the scope of JSDF missions beyond their conventional engineering functions, allowing for the assistance and rescue of troops from any nation participating in UNPKO as well as local civilians when they are under attack by armed groups. Accordingly, the 2015 reforms relaxed restrictions on the JSDF's use of weapons during missions abroad. Under these circumstances, it is more likely that the JSDF will exchange fire with armed groups in their mission theatres, thereby raising the likelihood that JSDF soldiers will be killed on foreign deployments in the years to come.

How will the Japanese public react to the first combat-related death on a military mission abroad? Given the fact that Japan has experienced no such casualty as yet, it is not difficult to imagine the public's initial shock and panic about the loss. Will the Japanese public, however, be able to continue to support JSDF deployments despite their human cost?

This article analyzes applicable social learning theories to examine whether and to what extent Japan is ready to accept combat-related deaths and—despite them—to continue to support further missions away from home.

Literature review on public support for war and military casualties

The literature on the relationship between military casualties and public support for war is rich. John Mueller's study on casualty aversion is a cornerstone in the field. Investigating both the Korean War and the Vietnam War, he concluded that the public withdraw their support for war as the number of casualties increases. In his article "What costs will democracies bear?", Hugh Smith explains that the public also tend to be averse to casualties when they recognise that the war and other military operations deviate from their core national interests.

Other scholars like Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler explain that it is not the number of casualties that determines public support for a war but rather the possibility of winning the war based on cost-benefit analyses. If the public believe that the war is likely to be won, they are more likely to continue to support it despite high casualties. Similarly, Gartner emphasises that it is not the casualty *number* that influences public support for a war; rather, but is the it serves as a context of the war through which the public can understand, experience, and interpret the war.

Adam Berinsky discusses another of these determinants: how political leaders and other elites' opinions greatly shape the public's understanding of the causes of war. He observes that public support is likely to be higher when political elites share unanimous opinions about the goals and the means of the war than when the elites are more divided amongst themselves. A similar observation is made by Jacobsen and Ringsmose in their examination of recent Danish experiences. They focus on the role of the media, concluding that when political elites present the media with a unanimous explanation of the cause and goals of war, the public are more likely to support the war and other military operations despite a high number of casualties amongst the soldiers.

These observations are useful, but they focus on countries and contexts where military casualties are already present and rising. They are not immediately applicable to today's Japan and may not adequately predict the Japanese public's acceptance of military casualties in missions abroad. Japan's military roles and functions on missions abroad have, since its first foreign deployment in 1992, been confined to those of engineering, such as repairing roads and civilian buildings. None of these activities involved combat of any kind, and no casualty has taken place to date. until today.

Society's acceptance of deaths of soldiers in foreign missions: social learning

It is for this reason that more attention needs to be paid to the study of processes by which the public can gradually confront and accept the reality of military casualties. Scholars including Gerhard Kümmel, Nina Leonhard, and Eyal Ben-Ari have turned to the field of social learning to assess the public's understanding and acceptance of their soldiers' deaths in military operations during humanitarian and peacekeeping activities. These scholars focus on how the public can come to justify casualties and define when and how their soldiers should risk their lives while deployed.

In their article, "Casualties and Civil-Military Relations: The German Polity between Learning and Indifference," Kümmel and Leonhard analyse the *Bundeswehr's* casualties during out-of-area missions since 1992. During 15 years of military missions abroad, the *Bundeswehr* has suffered a total of 108 soldiers killed (including those killed in accidents and exchanges of fire). Kümmel and Leonhard observe that Germany has experienced social learning while justifying the deaths of soldiers engaged in specific missions. They also argue that functional indifference—a corroborated sign of social learning—has increased over the years even though deaths of soldiers continue during its foreign missions. Over time, the "functionally indifferent" public pay less attention to information (particularly in the media) on soldiers' deaths. In modern Germany, they

find, the public have taken the position that the death of soldiers is largely a concern for political actors and the military, not the society as a whole. For social learning (and functional indifference) to be present, they conclude, an unquestionable sense of the legitimacy of the military mission must be fostered in the public. In other words, the public must feel that it is adequately informed and agree with the proposition that meeting international peacekeeping responsibilities may lead to the loss of lives.

Leonhard is particularly interested in the vocabulary of war. By carefully examining the use of language in the German media, she finds that the public's turn to alternative vocabulary representing or related to the issues of soldiers' deaths indicates that social learning is underway. She points out that the public actively (and bravely) began to trade euphemistic expressions for casualties (meant to avoid confrontation with those who oppose the sending of troops overseas) for terms that indicate death and loss more directly and explicitly. In her examples, words such as "Gefallene" (fallen) soldiers and "Veteranen" (veterans) had never been used in official documents and general use because they were associated with the Hitler regime; however, the current generation has resurfaced them to indicate casualties in military missions abroad. The Minister of Defense has used a similarly problematic word, "*krieg* (war)," to describe the situation of the German contingencies in Afghanistan suffering from a series of casualties. Leonhard traces the semantic effects of Germany's shifting war vocabulary, arguing that it is one of the important processes through which the public have come to justify their military commitments and accept that international missions could cost German soldiers their lives.

Ben-Ari focuses on the social rites following combat deaths. He argues that a "good death" can achieve legitimisation through a symbolic victory over the sense of meaninglessness and helplessness associated with a soldier's loss in combat. Ben-Ari claims that public acceptance hinges on retrieving the body, an official (and/or military) commemoration accompanied by informal rites of remembering, and psychological care for the families and next-of-kin left behind. By providing public and official rites to commemorate fallen soldiers, the deaths become social deaths—they become the subjects of public mourning and political discourses. This process demonstrates to the public that the soldiers are granted the military organisation's respect. It honours the soldiers' ultimate commitment to serving their community and symbolises that the military organisation remains committed to the individuals in death as well as in life. For Ben-Ari, even the minutia surrounding the handling of soldiers' deaths—the ceremonies, burials, funeral, family support, psychological care, and administrative compensation—helps cement the effect of a "good death." Furthermore, they help to restore the military organisation's legitimacy, as well as troop morale and cohesion, after they are tarnished by the loss of soldiers' lives.

The subsequent three sections return to Japan, searching for applications of these findings that could help Japan prepare for the seeming inevitability of JSDF casualties in combat on current and future deployments abroad.

Assessing the public's sense of legitimacy of the JSDF's missions abroad

Public opinion polls

A stark contrast can be observed between public support for the JSDF's humanitarian missions and their defence/combat tasks. Notably, the vast majority of the Japanese population favours the very *presence* of the JSDF itself. The public opinion poll conducted by the Cabinet Office of Japan in 2015 shows that 89.7% of the respondents highly evaluate the JSDF's services.

It is important to note that such high approval is generated by the public's evaluation of its non-combat services including those of disaster and humanitarian relief both inside Japan and

abroad. 79.2% of the respondents in the 2018 poll believe disaster relief to be the JSDF's primary function. The same poll shows that 87.3% highly approve of the JSDF's current activities abroad including those of United Nations Peacekeeping operations (legally limited to engineering activities) and disaster relief outside Japan. Furthermore, 89.4% believe that the JSDF should continue with such activities in the future.

However, a large part of the public is skeptical about the use of the military in foreign countries. According to analysis by Paul Midford, a leading scholar on Japanese public opinion, the Japanese tend to view the use of military power to solve international conflicts in foreign countries to be ineffective and inappropriate; the polls show that they often disagree with the use force to prevent human rights abuses, genocide, and terrorism in other countries. Similarly, Japanese responders believe that the JSDF's deployment to UNPKO should be limited to non-military, non-combat, and humanitarian contributions as they conceive them to be more appropriate.

These numbers suggest that the public expect the JSDF to be responsible for disaster relief and national defence to a limited degree, with PKO functions restricted to engineering and other non-combat tasks. With regards to the JSDF's missions abroad, the public are more likely to recognise the legitimacy of its deployments as long as they entail disaster relief and engineering. In other words, the public are less likely to accept the legitimacy of any JSDF missions threatening or related to combat in foreign countries.

The 2015 Security Legislation

Nationwide disputes erupted during the discussion (and passing) of the Diet's 2015 Security Legislation bill. This package of eleven laws aims to prepare Japan for the changing security landscape in Asia by relaxing regulations on the use of force. The Security Legislation has expanded conditions under which the JSDF can take military action, allowing it, *inter alia*, to assist the Japan Maritime Safety Agency in protecting civilian ships under attack in international waters and to intercept ballistic missiles aimed at US soil. It has also enabled JSDF soldiers to approach and fight local armed groups to rescue Japanese nationals as well as military personnel from other countries participating in UNPKO.

Critics claim that the new Security Legislation compromises the 9th Article of the Constitution (i.e., Japan's renouncing the belligerency right). According to a May 2017 opinion poll, 41% of respondents support the legislation while 47% do not. In the same poll, 40% believe the legislation violates the Constitution while 41% think it is constitutional. Moreover, the public are still confused about the legal reforms since they were written in such a complicated manner that general readers are not able to fully understand how the regulations have been modified and supplemented. A poll showed that 81.4% of respondents felt that the legislation was not sufficiently explained to the public by the government.

The use of weapons in UNPKO

Controversies and confusions also derived from the disputes over whether the JSDF's activities as part of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) violate the Five Principles of their participation in UNPKO. The Five Principles of peacekeeping stipulated in Article 6 (7) of the PKO Act specify the conditions under which Japan can participate in UN peacekeeping operations. They include: (1) agreement on a ceasefire reached amongst the parties to the armed conflict; (2) consent from the UN and from the host country allowing Japan to participate in UNPKO; (3) impartiality of the Japanese operations; (4) withdrawal if the above conditions are not met; and (5) the use of weapons within limits judged reasonably necessary. The debate came to the fore when a 300-member strong JSDF engineering unit—stationed in Juba under UNMISS since 2011—was granted wider permissions for the use of weapons under the auspices of the 2015 Security Legislation. In June

2016, the JSDF encountered serious exchanges of fire between the national armed forces of South Sudan and armed opposition groups. It was the first serious incident in which the JSDF was confronted with dangers that could result in the loss of soldiers' lives. It touched off a new wave of legal debates weighing the JSDF's right to combat the insurgents (covered by the Security Legislation's permissions for the use of weapons to protect soldiers from local insurgencies) against violating the PKO Five Principles (under which the JSDF must withdraw because the ceasefire of the conflicting parties is compromised). Subsequent polls showed that more than 50% of respondents did not support the JSDF's new combat functions as part of PKO activities.

Examining a sense of legitimacy over the JSDF's missions abroad

Political debates over casualties and the value of overseas military missions take place in any democratic society, and the presence of such debates *per se* is not problematic. What matters most, however, is that the public are debating the legitimacy of the military organisation itself, as well as that of its mission, based on a series of defence laws that appear to so conflict with each other that division is all but guaranteed. This situation prevents the public from adequately gauging the legitimacy of the JSDF's overseas operations, let alone the legitimacy of the JSDF's handling of its own force. In this situation, there is little room for the public to discuss, evaluate, accept, and understand what it means to lose their soldiers during foreign missions contributing to international peace. The current legal structure has proved an unconstructive platform that alienates the public from social learning about the deaths of soldiers away from home.

The semantic effects in the use of combat-related vocabulary

This section examines whether “semantic” debates pertaining to the JSDF over the use of the words “*senshi*” (combat death) and “*sento*” (combat) provide opportunities for social learning about combat-related deaths.

Senshi

While the word “*junshoku*” (death on duty) is used to signify the deaths of officers (particularly police officers and fire-fighters) killed on duty or in accidents, words such as “*senshi*” (death in combat) are generally treated as taboo in the JSDF. As the organization discourages its soldiers from talking about service-related deaths, particularly in peacekeeping missions abroad, opportunities for soldiers to examine and interpret *senshi* are rare. Commissioned Officers (CO) and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) alike have been trained not to bring up this topic officially—at least openly—unless absolutely necessary. They have been taught to hesitate when it comes to treating cases of combat-related deaths and avoid using related terminology. Additionally, many JSDF soldiers at both CO and NCO levels tend to believe in spirits residing in words, or “*kotodama*,” a belief that saying a word repeatedly, in this case “*senshi*” or “casualty,” could make it become reality. Yet, it is not only the spiritual factor that keeps the JSDF soldiers from discussing deaths. One should perhaps understand that *kotodama* is a reflection, rather than the cause, of other important organisational and disciplinary factors.

(1) Organisation

Currently, there is no formal programme within the JSDF's pre-deployment curriculum for PKO that allows the soldiers to discuss casualties in action, administrative procedures and the handling of bodies in case of death, or family support.

Some individual unit leaders within the JSDF keen on this issue designed a short non-commissioned individual workshop in their pre-deployment classes and trainings allowing their subordinates to discuss deaths in mission and to write their last will notes to their families.

However, these are exceptional cases, and their classes were all handled in a personal and non-commissioned manner, outside the JSDF official curriculum. These unit leaders often felt pressured by their superiors to stop offering such unofficial classes. As a result, most of the JSDF soldiers, COs and NCOs alike, are unfamiliar with administrative procedures in case of their deaths. One soldier states, “all the JSDF soldiers dispatched to foreign missions know that body bags are amongst the list of things to be sent to the mission areas, but no one actually knows how the JSDF and the Ministry of Defence would facilitate casualties and their families in detail. Yet no one dares to ask anyone.”

(2) Discipline

Shying away from casualties may also stem from JSDF discipline and training. Soldiers interviewed unanimously revealed that they were trained to think how to avoid any casualties during overseas missions but *not* trained how to react should any take place. JSDF soldiers with experience in past PKO missions mirrored this sentiment. A representative comment reads, “I have never thought about nor discussed casualties in overseas missions so far with any of my colleagues. I have never heard anyone doing that during my PKO career in the past decade.” More importantly, for many JSDF soldiers, talking about deaths and casualties on deployment implies disloyalty towards their senior officers as well as colleagues who previously served in peacekeeping missions. JSDF soldiers understand that a single casualty may lead to a surge in public criticism and questions, including the potential censure of top personnel or even Ministers in Tokyo. The fact that officers have (thus far) prevented a casualty that would lead to political turmoil is also seen as an achievement, and soldiers believe that discussing the matter in expectation of future casualties would tarnish their officers’ accomplishments to date. In this respect, talking about casualties is not only a taboo, but actively harms soldier morale. This situation constrains the JSDF from discussing and interpreting their members’ deaths and prevents both an exchange of ideas between the public and the military about casualties and progressive social learning on the topic.

Sento

A similar case emerged during recent public debates over the use of a specific word written in an activity log book kept by the JSDF soldiers serving in South Sudan.

An official accountability request was placed by a journalist to open a part of the JSDF log books written by an active peacekeeper stationed in Juba, South Sudan. The logs contained the word “*sento* (combat)” on the page describing the national armed forces’ exchange of heavy fire with insurgents in June 2016. It described the moment that the JSDF was caught in the middle of this clash, one that forced it to prepare to combat the insurgents alongside the South Sudan national armed forces. The log book described how the JSDF was preparing to respond to the combat environment, describing the situation the *sento*.

The media questioned this log book for two reasons. First, then Defence Minister Tomomi Inada explained to the Diet that the log book in question had already been destroyed, but soon after a copy was discovered. She was questioned about why she had disavowed its existence. Second, the journalist believed the word *sento* was not an “appropriate” word to appear in the JSDF’s log book as, in accordance with the Five Principles of UNPKO, peace accords and ceasefires must not be compromised for the JSDF to remain on deployment. The presence of combat, the press realized, must itself lead to the JSDF’s immediate withdrawal. Consequent political battles continued in the Diet over what *sento* is and how it should be defined, with the Japanese government insisting that the events of June 2016 did not describe “*sento*” but rather “*shototsu*” (armed collision) and thus did not violate the Five Principles.

One could compile a long list of Japanese military terminology that was used during WWII but then altered after in order to soften its connotations and avoid political criticism, especially

from Asian countries. Narushige Michishita discusses how the current, euphemistic ways of using or reinventing these terms blur their meanings and weaken civilian control over the JSDF. He suggests that the original terms would promote transparency and help tighten controls. Similar arguments could be made from the perspective of social learning, as these blurred labels distance the public from opportunities for discussing the deaths of soldiers. The following is an excerpt of Michishita's list:

Current JP terminology	Current terminology used	Literal translation	⇒	Suggested terminology	Suggested terminology	Literal translation
自衛隊	<i>jieitai</i>	self-defence force	→	日本防衛軍	<i>nihon boei gun</i>	Japan armed force
自衛官	<i>jieikan</i>	JSDF member	→	軍人	<i>gunjin</i>	members of the military
陸上自衛隊	<i>rikujo jieitai</i>	Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF)	→	陸軍	<i>rikugun</i>	Japanese Army (JA)
海上自衛隊	<i>kaijo jieitai</i>	Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF)	→	海軍	<i>kaigun</i>	Japanese Navy (JN)
航空自衛隊	<i>kouku jieitai</i>	Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF)	→	空軍	<i>kugun</i>	Japanese Air Force (JAF)
普通科	<i>futsu-ka</i>	general department	→	歩兵科	<i>hobei-ka</i>	infantry
特科	<i>tok-ka</i>	special department	→	砲兵科	<i>ho-bei-ka</i>	artillery
施設科	<i>shisetsu-ka</i>	installation department	→	工兵科	<i>kobei-ka</i>	engineer
統合幕僚長	<i>togo bakuryo cho</i>	Chief of Staff	→	統合参謀長	<i>togo sambo cho</i>	Joint Staff Chief of Joint Staff
護衛艦	<i>goei-kan</i>	protection ship	→	駆逐艦	<i>kuchiku-kan</i>	destroyer
1佐	<i>issa</i>	first colonel	→	大佐	<i>taisa</i>	colonel
1尉	<i>ichii</i>	first lieutenant	→	大尉	<i>taii</i>	lieutenant
部隊行動基準	<i>butai kodo kijun</i>	unit activity standard	→	交戦規則	<i>kosen kitei</i>	rules of engagement

Source: An excerpt from Michishita 2012, modified by the Author

The government's resistance to the current debate suggests that any semantic progress will be slow to develop. Indeed, in this regard, no social learning appears to be happening when it comes to public or institutional discussion of the deaths of soldiers abroad.

Institutionalising the dead

The Ministry of Defence has long held public and official commemorations and ceremonies for JSDF personnel killed in accidents. The “Memorial Zone,” an official cenotaph erected within the grounds of the Ministry of Defence, was built to commemorate and to “pay profound honour and grief to the members of the JSDF who lost their lives in service.” The Memorial Zone was visited by Prime Ministers Kishi (1957), Ikeda (1962), Takeshita (1988), and it has been made an official annual memorial visit by Prime Ministers since Murayama (1994). It is also open to the public (registration required). Prime Minister Abe paid an official visit to the Zone on 13 October 2018, saying “we will never waste their lives lost during service, deliver their wills, and will firmly continue to defend peace and lives of our people.”

However, a formalised procedure for handling future combat-related deaths does not exist, nor has there been formal discussion of standardised procedures for commemoration and public mourning. One officer from the Welfare Division in the Ministry of Defence revealed that there are no standard protocols or guidelines should the need arise, though past practices for accident-related deaths in the JSDF might suggest that such casualties would be commemorated in the Memorial Zone in the same way. In the same vein, other officials have explained that no formalised public mourning procedures have been discussed in the Ministry for the specific case of combat deaths, unlike for other types of deaths.

These witnesses suggest that the government will wait until the JSDF suffers its first combat casualty abroad to discuss official rites and ceremonies for public commemorations and mourning, leaving no time to examine whether and to what degree such rites should (or should not) be handled differently from other types of military deaths. This may fail to provide the public with adequate information regarding the reasons and the value of deaths on deployment, thereby blurring the legitimacy of their sacrifice.

Conclusion

Since its withdrawal from UNMISS in May 2017, Japan has not sent JSDF troops to UNPKO. At this point, no specific plan is being made for deployment to UNPKO missions in the imminent future. Risks of military casualties in UNPKO have diminished for the time being. Still, the risk of combat-related casualties remains. Since the enactment of the Law on Punishment of and Measures against Acts of Piracy in 2009, Japan has deployed a nearly 400-member strong unit to Djibouti for anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, including air patrol and vessel escorting activities near the Somali coast. It also has established its first overseas military base in Djibouti to provide a secure work and maintenance environment for its troops. As of January 2019, the mission in Djibouti is the JSDF’s lone foreign deployment, and it has yet to suffer military casualties.

Current opportunities for the public to discuss, understand, and accept (or reject) the threat of JSDF combat casualties are limited. The public’s understanding of the legitimacy of their military missions and of combat-related deaths remains inadequate, stalling social learning in this area across Japan. Under these circumstance, the chance for continuing public support for military missions will be slim once the JSDF suffers its first casualty in combat. Japan faces serious and urgent needs for more adequate and profound discourse among the public and between state authorities over what it means to lose JSDF troops’ lives. Failure in these efforts will jeopardize the very legitimacy of Japanese military missions abroad and threaten the loss of support for Japanese contributions to international peace.

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