

On Japan's Use of Space for Defense Purposes

By KINOSHITA Hiroo

The National Diet of Japan passed the "Basic Space Bill" and it has become a full-fledged law at the end of May. Media reports that this law brings about a big change in Japan's space policy as it lifts the ban on the military use of space and upgrades the space development to national strategy, thereby establishing a system of political leadership. It is true that our space policy has been changed by this new law, but it is quite doubtful that it should be called "a big change." I would frankly say, "At last, we have made it this far. It took us so long."

In 1984 when Mr. NAKASONE Yasuhiro was Prime Minister of Japan, Mr. TSUKAMOTO Saburo, who was a Diet member of Democratic Socialist Party of Japan at that time, asked at the House of Representatives Budget Committee why the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) could not use communications satellites. Due to the Diet resolution in 1969 that committed Japan to using space "for peaceful purposes only," the majority in the government interpreted the meaning of "peaceful" as "non-military" and considered that the SDF was not allowed to use satellites. I was an official at the Defense Agency of Japan then and thought it totally unreasonable that the use of communication satellites by SDF was denied at a time when the public at large enjoyed full access to them by way of making telephone calls. Therefore, I worked on ministries concerned to install in Iwojima Air Base of SDF a ground-based station for "Satellite Sakura" which belonged to "Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation (NTT)."

This was the start of space use by the SDF. Since then, the scope of satellite use by the SDF has been expanded, though only gradually, as exemplified by the case that the Defense Agency was permitted to utilize information gathered by remote-sensing satellites. However, the use of space and satellites by the general public in such areas as communication, information, Global Positioning System (GPS) has progressed at a more remarkable speed. And in defense area, constant information gathering from satellites is indispensable to homeland security against ballistic missile attacks on Japan.

We should have lifted the ban of space use, including the use of surveillance satellites, by the SDF in the middle of 1980s. Politicians should be accused of this 20-year delay because they were too timid to touch the Diet resolution although it was a product in 1960s when the future course of space development was still uncertain. Similar cases can be observed in other areas. I sincerely hope that politicians and government officials always take foresighted actions.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Mr.KINOSHITA Hiroo, Advisor of National Small Business & Information Promotion Center, which originally appeared on the BBS “Giron-Hyakushutsu” of GFJ on June 3, 2008.)