



**Japan, U.S ‘Nuclear Umbrella’ and trans-alliance cooperation for nuclear  
disarmament**

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### *Introduction*

Last April, U.S. President Barak Obama outlined his policy on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament in Prague. In the speech, he referred to "America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons" (1). Not surprisingly, this remark has been welcomed around the world. The vision of abolishing nuclear weapons is broadly supported in the international community. And the United States is the most powerful nuclear weapon state, whose leadership is essential to promote nuclear disarmament.

Nevertheless, the American leadership is not sufficient for our moving toward a nuclear weapon free world. The global security environment of today is so complicated that the goal cannot be achieved without cooperation and commitment of all nuclear weapon states and key non-nuclear weapon states. This is a fundamental reason we need to consider the role of non-nuclear U.S. allies including Japan for eliminating nuclear weapons. Besides, many of them have advanced nuclear capabilities. This implies that they are in a position to influence U.S. national security policy as well as the international politics of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

If so, what could Japan do to promote nuclear disarmament possibly in cooperation with other non-nuclear U.S. allies? The purpose of this paper is to explore an answer to this question. And for this purpose, I address a policy concept which is familiar to experts in the arms control and disarmament community. That is "no-first-use of nuclear weapons." A simple definition of the concept is to declare to use nuclear weapons only in response to an attack with nuclear weapons. As I discuss below, nuclear weapon states could facilitate nuclear disarmament and strengthen the global nuclear non-proliferation regime by adopting a no-first-use policy. Nevertheless, the United States and U.S.-led alliances have never adopted a no-first-use policy until today.

This, however, could be changed under the Obama administration. Currently, the U.S. government is drafting Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). This process is legally mandated by U.S. Congress, which will be completed by the end of this year. And the final document will guide the nuclear weapons policy of the Obama administration. The

very language of “no-first-use” is unlikely to be used in the text of NPR, because it seems unacceptable to the national security establishment of the United States. But, for the first time in history, it is seriously discussed within the U.S. government to limit the purpose of U.S. nuclear arsenal to deterring the use of nuclear weapons. In other words, the basic idea of no-first-use could be absorbed in a renewed NPR, to revise U.S. nuclear weapons policy(2). Non-nuclear U.S. allies, in turn, would have to review the role of U.S. nuclear deterrent in their national security policies.

In view of that, this paper discusses Japan’s policy and possible cooperation with other non-nuclear U.S. allies in the field of nuclear disarmament. At first, I point out potential positive effects of no-first-use on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. Then, I review U.S. and Japanese positions on no-first-use and critically examine a policy of so-called “calculated ambiguity” adopted by the United States and supported by Japan. After that, I present a course of actions Japan could take to promote nuclear disarmament, suggesting that Japan should begin a consultation with the United States on the future of U.S. extended deterrence and declare its support for the concept of no-first-use. I also examine the possibility of Japan’s supporting no-first-use in the foreseeable future. Finally I discuss possible trans-alliance cooperation between Japan and other non-nuclear U.S. allies in relation to the proposed course of actions for Japan.

#### *No-First-Use and Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament*

To begin with, I discuss the policy concept of no-first-use and its relevance to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. The concept, per se, is not novel. In fact, some nuclear weapon states adopted a no-first-use policy. However, to adopt a no-first-use policy is not a common practice among nuclear weapon states. In the past, the former Soviet Union adopted a no-first-use policy, but at present, China is the only nuclear weapon state to do so.

This demonstrates a stern reality that most of nuclear weapon states have retained the option of the first use of nuclear weapons until today. Under the circumstances, the adoption of a no-first-use policy by nuclear weapon states is quite significant for two reasons. Firstly, it would signal their intention to limit the role of nuclear weapons, in principle, only to deterring the use of nuclear weapons. Secondly, they could raise the threshold of the use of nuclear weapons, if they implemented the declaratory policy sincerely. This is why no-first-use has been discussed in the arms control community for long time. Nuclear disarmament requires not only to reduce the number of existing nuclear weapons but also to diminish the role of nuclear weapons in

national security policies, as President Obama stated in his Prague address. The United States and Russia could cut back their excessive nuclear weapons further, without changing their nuclear doctrines. But, their strategic arms reduction would eventually come to a deadlock, unless they revised the role of nuclear weapons in their national security policies. On the other hand, if they adopted a no-first-use policy, they could make their nuclear arsenals much smaller.

Of course, it is fair to question if a mere declaratory policy of no-first-use is really effective and credible. To make a no-first-use policy operationally meaningful is not a simple task. However, some experts have suggested various means and actions to do so<sup>(3)</sup>. We could also expect that, if a nuclear weapon state adopted a no-first-use policy, its operational war plan and weapons procurement program would be revised in some ways to reflect the declaratory policy. Besides, a nuclear weapon state could enunciate its commitment to nuclear disarmament by adopting a no-first-use policy.

Moreover, nuclear weapon states' support for no-first-use could help strengthening the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Under the regime, how to assure the security of non-nuclear weapon states from nuclear threats has been a major issue of concern. The United States, for instance, has provided its nuclear deterrent to its allies including Japan. But a large number of non-nuclear weapon states have not received such a protection. Many of them have demanded a pledge by nuclear weapon states not to use their nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states on certain conditions, which is known as "negative security assurances," in stead of their nuclear umbrellas. It also should be noted that non-nuclear weapon states expect nuclear weapon states to carry out their responsibilities under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT): that is moving seriously toward eliminating their nuclear weapons. Accordingly, nuclear weapon states could ease the anxiety of some non-nuclear weapon states about their security and eliminate a major justification for their going nuclear by providing "negative security assurances" and supporting no-first-use. This is important, because more non-nuclear weapon states could acquire nuclear weapon capabilities, as their economies grow and the civilian uses of nuclear energy spread around the world.

#### *No-First-Use and the Japan-U.S. Alliance*

Despite these potential positive effects on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, the United States has never adopted a no-first-use policy. And Japan has never proclaimed its support for no-first-use. In effect, the United States and Japan have been unwilling to limit the purpose of U.S. nuclear arsenal to deterring the use of nuclear weapons. In stead of explaining the development of U.S. nuclear weapons

policy in detail, I would like to point out two basic facts about it. One is that the U.S. government has expected that nuclear weapons could be used as an effective instrument for various purposes. The other is that the U.S. government has resisted giving up freedom to use nuclear weapons unilaterally or by international agreements.

But, why on earth the United States still retains the option of the first use of nuclear weapons? Apparently, there are multiple reasons. One of them is the need of deterring the use of chemical and biological weapons. In the post-Cold War era, the U.S. government has adopted a policy of “calculated ambiguity,” in order to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to states inimical to the United States and its allies as well as non-state actors like terrorist organizations. The idea of “calculated ambiguity” is simple: the deterrent effect of U.S. nuclear forces could be enhanced by not specifying when and how to use nuclear weapons. Consequently, the U.S. government has not ruled out the use of nuclear weapons in response to an attack with chemical and biological weapons on U.S. mainland, U.S. troops oversea, and U.S. allies(4).

I referred to the concept of “calculated ambiguity” here, because the Japanese government also accepted the concept as a major rationale to oppose no-first-use. According to the past and present National Defense Program Guidelines of the Japanese government, Japan has relied on U.S. nuclear deterrent to ensure its security from “the threat of nuclear weapons” during and after the Cold War(5). But today, the Japanese government seems to expect U.S. nuclear deterrent more than just to deter an attack on Japan with nuclear weapons. It is reported that, the Japanese officials have occasionally urged the U.S. government not to abandon the option of a nuclear retaliation in response to an attack on Japan with chemical and biological weapons, in view of North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction capabilities(6).

Certainly, we should carefully observe the strategic environment of East Asia in discussing Japan’s national security policy. At present, North Korea is reported to maintain a biological weapons program and possess a large arsenal of chemical weapons. It has already deployed medium range ballistic missiles that could hit almost all over Japan. And it is developing nuclear weapons in the face of strong international pressures demanding the suspension and renunciation of its nuclear program(7). In East Asia, China is continuing the modernization of its military forces. Although China adheres to a no-first-use policy today, it is the only “nuclear weapon state” acknowledged under NPT building up nuclear forces(8). Considering such serious security concerns for Japan and the United State, it may sound absurd for them to adopt a no-first-use policy.

*A Critical Examination of "Calculated Ambiguity"*

But, I dare challenge such a notion by examining the logic of "calculated ambiguity" critically. First of all, the proponents of "calculated ambiguity" tend to emphasize the risk involved in a no-first-use policy. We must admit that removing "calculated ambiguity" could diminish the deterrent effect of U.S. nuclear forces. However, we should not hastily reject a no-first-use policy for this reason, because this does not necessarily mean that the security of the United States and its allies would be undermined. Instead, we should pose a question before doing so: How risky and damaging removing "calculated ambiguity" really is for their security? It must be extraordinarily difficult for anyone to answer such a question with confidence. Today, U.S. "extended deterrence" is consisted of not only its nuclear forces but also its overwhelming conventional forces. Arguably, the security of Japan could be maintained without implicit threat by the United States to use nuclear weapons in response to a non-nuclear attack on Japan.

Secondly, the proponents of "calculated ambiguity" seem to assume that the more strongly the U.S. government commits to use nuclear weapons, the more credible U.S. nuclear deterrent become. But, this is not necessarily the case either, because the credibility of U.S. nuclear deterrent is affected by various factors. The use of nuclear weapons has never been legally banned in the international community. Nevertheless, a norm against the first use of nuclear weapons has been created and reinforced for the last decades, although it may not prevent the use of nuclear weapons on purpose or by accident in the future(9). Under such circumstances, it would be very hard for a responsible state like the United States, to decide to launch a nuclear retaliation to a non-nuclear attack. As a result, even if the United States implied to use nuclear weapons in response to a non-nuclear attack, some states may perceive that the threat is just a bluff. It is often argued that an irrational actor such as a desperate dictator and a terrorist organization cannot be deterred. But, we should also keep in mind that deterrence could fail even between rational actors.

In fact, the United State and Japan seem to understand this, because they are developing and deploying missile defense systems. Nevertheless, the opponents of no-first-use tend to overlook the possibility of rational deterrence failure, when they defend a policy of "calculated ambiguity." I am not implying here that the U.S. extended deterrent is not effective or Japan is in danger. The point I want to make is, that those who support a policy of "calculated ambiguity" seem to overestimate not only the risk of a no-first-use policy, but also the effectiveness of a policy of "calculated

ambiguity.”

And consequently, they have missed a serious risk attendant on a policy of “calculated ambiguity.” Scott Sagan of Stanford University calls it “commitment trap.” Virtually, the U.S. government has pledged to use nuclear weapons, if necessary, even in response to a non-nuclear attack by adopting a policy of “calculated ambiguity.” As a result, it could face strong political pressures demanding the use of nuclear weapons, for example, in the case that a small scale attack with chemical weapons were conducted against a U.S. ally. Under the circumstances, the U.S. government could resist such pressures and refrain from using nuclear weapons. But U.S. policy of “calculated ambiguity” increases the possibility that the United States use nuclear weapons for fear of losing the credibility of its own commitment, when deterrence failed(10). It seems to me a serious risk that we should not ignore.

Therefore, we should deliberately weigh the merit and risk of a no-first-use policy against the merit and risk of a policy of “calculated ambiguity,” before supporting either of these policies. This is, I believe, the least we could do to make a reasoned policy decision. Unfortunately, the Japanese government has not presented a convincing argument for defending their position against the claims of the advocates of no-first-use.

If the Japanese government failed to do so, Japan’s reputation as a country earnest about nuclear disarmament could be tarnished.

#### *A Proposal on Japan’s Course of Actions for Promoting Nuclear Disarmament*

On the basis of the observation I made above, I recommend that the Japanese government should consider seriously supporting no-first-use and propose the U.S. government to begin a bilateral consultation on the future of U.S. extended deterrent provided for the security of Japan and East Asia. In the policy dialogue, the two governments should review the role of nuclear deterrent in overall U.S. extended deterrent.

Actually, this idea of holding such a bilateral consultation is becoming a reality. On July 18, 2009, the governments of Japan and the United States formally agreed to establish a regular consultative forum to discuss U.S. extended deterrent. Reportedly, they will exchange their views on NPR at the forum for opener(11). Conducting a serious consultation on security issues is desirable in order to strengthen mutual trust between Japan and the United States. But the Japanese government should not use the opportunity to obstruct the U.S. government reviewing the concept of nuclear deterrence in U.S. national security strategy. It is very ironic and even tragic if Japan

known as “the only nation suffered from nuclear attacks” resisted such a move on the American side, becoming an obstacle on the path toward a nuclear weapon free world.

Therefore, I rather suggest that the Japanese government should affirm to the U.S. government that it would not oppose the U.S. decision to limit the purpose of U.S. nuclear arsenal to deterring the use of nuclear weapons. As I mentioned before, the U.S. government could make such a decision as a result of the ongoing NPR process. But the U.S. government may not disclose the decision, because the NPR is basically a classified document, which is not meant to be used to explain U.S. policy to other states. In any case, I would advise that the Japanese government should declare not to expect the United States to use nuclear weapons in response to a non-nuclear attack on Japan and call for other U.S. allies to follow suit. I think whether they use the language of no-first-use in their declaratory policies and official documents or not is a secondary question in the meantime.

Such a course of actions would enhance Japan’s prestige as a promoter of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. In addition, Japan’s support for no-first-use could send a strong message to other states that U.S. conventional deterrent is effective for maintaining the security of Japan. And such a message could actually increase the credibility of overall U.S. extended deterrent. I do not expect that North Korea would renounce its nuclear weapon program, just because the United States and Japan come to support no-first-use. Such an action would not stop the modernization of China’s military forces either. But, their support for no-first-use could help reducing tensions and distrust in East Asia.

#### *Would Japan Support No-First-Use?*

However, it would not be easy to persuade the political leaders and officials of the Japanese government to review a policy of “calculated ambiguity” for several reasons.

First of all, potential damage caused by an attack with chemical and biological weapons is too serious to ignore, no matter how slim the chance of its occurrence is. Secondly, decision-makers in general have a psychological inclination toward risk-aversion rather than risk-taking. Consequently, as far as the current policy of nuclear deterrence appears working well, decision-makers would prefer the status quo to giving up “calculated ambiguity,” despite the potential merits of doing so.

Moreover, it is difficult to predict the future strategic environment in East Asia. In such an uncertain situation, decision-makers may sense it wise to have policy options as many as possible to deal with unpredictable developments in the future. Finally, and probably most importantly, the Japanese government seems to be



restrained by the fear of offending or disappointing those who are pro-Japanese in the government and the policy community of the United States by challenging U.S. national security policy. Apparently, Japan's position on no-first-use has been affected by these factors and it seems very difficult to change these factors.

Nevertheless, it is not impossible to foresee that Japan would come to support no-first-use in the near future. In Japan, a general election of the Lower House of the Diet was held in August 2009 and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) headed by Yukio Hatoyama, which was then the largest opposition party, won the majority of seats in the Lower House. As a result, the current Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-Komeito coalition government would come to an end, leading to the birth of Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)-centered coalition government in the mid-September. What is noteworthy here is that DPJ issued its nuclear policy in 2000, which states its intention to seek an agreement with the United States on "not to use nuclear weapons possessed by U.S. military forces to protect Japan in advance of an attack on Japan with nuclear weapons.(12)" Even if such a bilateral agreement were concluded, Japan would remain under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, but the purpose of the U.S. nuclear deterrent provided to Japan would be limited to preventing a nuclear attack on Japan.

At present, the DPJ is not unanimous in some important issues related to national security and defense of Japan. It is not clear how strongly the aforementioned nuclear policy is supported within the DPJ. Nevertheless, Katusya Okada, who is the Secretary General of the party and is predicted to be the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the DPJ-centered government, repeatedly stated his support for the policy before and during the Lower House election. To say the least, the DPJ-centered government is more likely to support no-first-use than the present LDP-Komeito government. Of course, the DPJ would or could not implement its nuclear policy for various reasons after seizing power for various reasons. The proponents of no-first-use, thus, should not expect too much, but the window of opportunity seems opening now.

#### *Toward a Trans-Alliance Cooperation for Nuclear Disarmament*

Finally, I discuss Japan's possible cooperation with other non-nuclear U.S. allies for promoting nuclear disarmament in relation to the course of actions I proposed for Japan. I suggested the Japanese government to begin a consultation with the U.S. government to review the concept of nuclear deterrence in the overall U.S. extended deterrent. The goal of such a dialogue is to build a consensus that the solo purpose of U.S. nuclear arsenal is to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. However, such a consensus building may be disturbed by other U.S. allies, because Japan is not the only

ally for the United States to deal with, although the United States is the only ally for Japan. Basically, the structure of the American global alliance system is asymmetric. Therefore, the U.S. government could refuse to support no-first-use because of a few U.S. allies opposing no-first-use. Or the U.S. government could use a few U.S. allies' opposition as an excuse not to support no-first-use.

This is the reason I think Japan should work with other major non-nuclear U.S. allies to build trans-alliance consensus to support no-first-use. In order to achieve the goal, the Japanese government would have to conduct complicated multilateral diplomacy. The influence of U.S. allies including Japan on U.S. policy-making is limited. They, thus, may not be able to persuade the United States to adopt a no-first-use policy, no matter what they do. But, the U.S. allies should avoid taking any actions that might hinder the U.S. government's quest for diminishing the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy. Potential partners for Japan include Australia, Canada and Germany. As far as Japan is concerned, it also needs to reaffirm its commitment to Non-Nuclear Three Principles and NPT. This would help assuring other states that Japan has no intention to seek nuclear armaments, even if the United States adopted a no-first-use policy.

### *Conclusions*

Since the end of the Cold War, Japan has strived to play a leading role in the international efforts for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. On the other hand, it is also true that Japan had asked the United States to maintain effective nuclear deterrent for its security. And this gravely affected Japan's policies and behaviors in the field of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. As a result, some find a wide gap between the image of Japan as "the only nation suffered from atomic bombings" and the image of Japan obsessed with the logic and practice of nuclear deterrence. In a sense, the proposal I made here is an attempt to find a way to narrow the gap without endangering the peace and security of Japan and East Asia.

On the contrary, the proposed course of actions entails some merits of reducing nuclear threats to Japan as well as the international community as a whole. It could enhance the credibility of overall U.S. extended deterrent and facilitate trans-alliance cooperation between non-nuclear U.S. allies in the field of arms control and disarmament. Then, it could improve the security environment in East Asia, to facilitate confidence building and the practices of cooperative security. Moreover, it could contribute to strengthening the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the norm against the first use of nuclear weapons. In any case, it is imperative for non-nuclear

U.S. allies including Japan to critically examine the concept of nuclear deterrence and to begin constructive policy discussions on their role in nuclear disarmament in each country as well as across alliances.

#### Notes

1 Remarks by President Barak Obama, Hradcany Square, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009, The White House Web site, <[http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/)>.

2 Notably, the recently published report of a bipartisan expert group commissioned by a prestigious American think tank, the Council on Foreign Relations, recommends the U.S. government to state that the sole purpose of its nuclear weapons is to prevent the use of nuclear weapons by state and non-state actors. The Independent Task Force Report No. 62, U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy, April 2009.

3 Steven E. Miller, "The Utility of Nuclear Weapons and the Strategy of No-First-Use," Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs Website, <<http://www.pugwash.org/reports/nw/miller.htm>>.

4 "U.S. 'Negative Security Assurances' At a Glance, Arms Control Association (thereafter ACA) Website, <<http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/negsec>>; "Looking Back: Carter's 1978 Declaration and the Significance of Security Assurances," ACT , October 2008, ACA Website, [http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008\\_10/lookingback](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008_10/lookingback).

5 The National Defense Program Guidelines FY 2005~, Prime Minister Of Japan and his Cabinet Website, [http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/policy/2004/1210taikou\\_e.html](http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/policy/2004/1210taikou_e.html).

6 Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998, pp. 59-60, 118; Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Ponenman, and Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004, pp. 204-206, 210.

7 Arms Control and Proliferation Profile: North Korea, ACA Web site, <<http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/northkoreaprofile>>.

8 Arms Control and Proliferation Profile: China, ACA Web site, <<http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/chinaprofile>>.

9 Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945*. New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2007; T. V. Paul, *The Tradition of Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

10 Scott D. Sagan, "The commitment Trap: Why the United States Should Not Use Nuclear Threats to Deter Biological and Chemical Weapons Attacks," *International*

*Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Spring 200), pp. 85-115; *ibid.*, “The Case for No First Use,”  
*Survival*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (June-July 2009), pp. 163-182.

11 *Asahi Shinbun*, July 19, 2009.

12 Minshuto Kaku Seisaku (Nuclear Policy of the Democratic Party of Japan), the Democratic Party of Japan Website, <http://www.dpj.or.jp/news/?num=10860>.