

Commentary on Morton Halperin's "The Nuclear Dimension of the U.S.-Japan Alliance"



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The following review is by Richard Halloran, an independent writer contributing to American and Asian publications on security matters, US policy in Asia and other Asian and Pacific issues.

Morton Halperin's paper entitled "The Nuclear Dimension of the U.S.-Japan Alliance" is seriously flawed on at least four counts:

1) The author sets up a straw man in examining Japan as a nuclear power when there is little evidence today that any responsible leader or organization in Japan is seriously contemplating having their nation acquire nuclear arms. That calls into question the very reason for writing the paper. If the author knows of evidence that Japan is earnestly giving thought to going nuclear, he should give us as much as he has got because it would make one helluva story. Moreover, Mr. Halperin cannot blithely brush aside "the question of political feasibility" of nuclear weapons in Japan because that is at the very heart of the matter. The economics, technology, and even the military aspects of the issue pale before a political altar in Japan.

2) Throughout the paper are contentions, some of them startling, that cry out for evidence, quotes, and authoritative citations to prove the point. For instance, the author writes: "Until very recently, the U.S. goal was to 'prevail' in such an encounter [nuclear conflict], but this unattainable objective has finally been abandoned." Where is the evidence that is so, where are the quotes to prove the point?

Again, the author states: "U.S. nuclear policy continues to focus on deterring a deliberate surprise attack on the United States, including by threatening, and planning, to launch forces on warning of such an attack." Again, where is the evidence that is so, where are the quotes to prove the point?

Similarly, the author asserts: "Deterring the actions of rogue states or terrorists is a relatively new objective for U.S. nuclear forces, emerging most clearly in the post-cold war period." Where is the evidence that this is a mission for nuclear forces? Who says so? In addition, there appears to be an unresolved contradiction with an earlier statement that US nuclear forces are still intended to deter/defeat Russian nuclear forces.

In another instance, the author writes: "Many Japanese concerned with international affairs have long chafed under the U.S. alliance, longing to end the treaty and reassert Japan's role as an independent great power." This statement requires extensive evidence and quotes, which are not likely to be forthcoming. One should be careful to distinguish between those Japanese who want to end the alliance with the US, who are relatively few, and those Japanese who want, for a variety of reasons, to see US forces reduced or withdrawn from Japan even as Japan retains its treaty with the US. Those are two different things.

(I did not see the footnotes to the paper but even so, questions such as these should have been answered in the text itself.)

3) The paper is further marred by factual inaccuracies. The author writes, for instance, that US nuclear forces are "kept on hair trigger alert." Having been in the operations centers at the former SAC and of NORAD, and in missile control capsules, and having flown in B-52 and B-1 bombers, and having been to sea in SSBN's, I can certify that there is much evidence to the contrary, that US nuclear forces are not on "hair trigger alert." Indeed, some officers who are knowledgeable about nuclear matters have wondered out loud, half-joking but half-serious, whether the US could launch its nuclear weapons in a timely manner, given the extensive human and technical controls on them.

Similarly, Mr. Halperin states: "It [Japan] has consistently refused to allow the United States to store nuclear weapons on its territory and successfully negotiated in 1972 the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Okinawa in 1972 prior to reversion-albeit with a secret pledge by Prime Minister Sato to President Nixon that Japan would permit their return in a dire emergency." That is off the mark. The so-called Transit Agreement permits the US to move nuclear weapons at any time through Japan, including Okinawa, but not to store them there. This was negotiated in 1969 to take effect on the reversion of Okinawa in 1972. Thus a warship or plane carrying nuclear weapons could stop in Japan but must move on without unloading the nukes. This was also not, as the author states elsewhere, a recently discovered development but has been known since before the reversion of Okinawa.

4) Lastly, the paper is flawed by omissions, most notably the effect on the entire nuclear picture and particularly that in Northeast Asia of the India-Pakistan nuclear detonations last year. The lone reference to those catalytic events was: "The most immediate danger is that India and Pakistan will stumble into a nuclear war following their nuclear tests and their apparent determination to deploy nuclear forces." The paper should have addressed how would that affect the national security of the United States and how that would influence nuclear developments in Northeast Asia. Has this made the Japanese more nervous? Have the India-Pakistan explosions affected the North Koreans, who

seem ready to resume their nuclear weapons program, or at least to threaten to renew it, on almost any excuse. The paper should also have taken into account the response of China, already a substantial nuclear power.

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