Policy Forum 09-077: Japan’s Challenges and Dilemmas over Nuclear Disarmament

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Japan's Challenges and Dilemmas over Nuclear Disarmament

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By Masa Takubo

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I. Introduction

Masa Takubo, an independent analyst on nuclear issues and Operator of the Nuclear Information

website Kakujoho, writes, "the fear-mongering claims that Japan will want nuclear weapons if the US adopts a new policy need to be examined more rigorously. Misinterpretation of Japan's intentions should not become the reason for no change. Nor should Japan be used as an excuse by those who want to keep US nuclear policies stuck in the cold war."

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II. Article by Masa Takubo

- "Japan's Challenges and Dilemmas over Nuclear Disarmament"
By Masa Takubo

According to sources close to the US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) process, Japan is being referred to as a major obstacle in the road toward a world free of nuclear weapons.[1] Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) close to the Obama administration have it that this process is seriously considering whether the US could adopt a policy declaring that the only purpose of its nuclear weapons is to deter the use of nuclear weapons by others (called "core deterrence" by the US National Academy of Sciences' Committee on International Security and Arms Control).[2] However, US administration proponents of the nuclear status quo cite Japanese anxieties about moving away from the cold war doctrine of extended deterrence and the prospect of deeper reductions in the US nuclear arsenal as reasons why the United States should not change its nuclear policy. They say that ignoring its ally's concerns would prompt Japan to acquire nuclear weapons. This is a particularly topical issue, as the deadline for the NPR is December 2009, although US government sources indicate that most of the key decisions will be made by October.

This article explores how real and widespread such security concerns actually are in Japan, with consideration of Japanese attitudes to nuclear weapons and its likely responses if the United States were to adopt a core deterrence policy. Looking more broadly at the relationship between Japan and the United States, it is important to analyze whether the concerns are as serious and insurmountable as is being suggested, or whether Japan's dilemmas are being deliberately invoked to prevent the kind of major overhaul of US nuclear policies that would be necessary to fulfil President Obama's stated objective of building peace and security without nuclear weapons.

Japan takes pride in having adopted three non-nuclear principles, which were formalized in 1967 by Prime Minister Eisaku Sato, and which specify a clear commitment to not possessing and not producing nuclear weapons, as well as not permitting their entry into the country.[3] Japan is also a strong supporter of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and lead sponsor for a widely-supported UN General Assembly resolution on nuclear disarmament that has been adopted every year since 1994.[4] Why then is it suspected that Japan will seek a nuclear capability if the US adopts a core deterrence policy?

The answer to this lies in the history of Japan's nuclear policy. When Japan adopted its three non-nuclear principles, it was, in Sato's mind, part of a package in which protection by the "nuclear umbrella" of US extended deterrence was a precondition.[5] The implication is that Japan will not seek nuclear weapons as long as the nuclear umbrella is regarded as reliable. This also has negative implications for global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. Since there is a fear (either perceived or real) that Japan might acquire its own nuclear arsenal if the umbrella is withdrawn or

comes to be regarded as unreliable, the arrangement in effect gives Japan the leverage to put pressure on the United States to avoid taking any significant steps to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in its security and military doctrines, thereby impeding progress on freeing the world of nuclear weapons.

One way to solve Japan's dilemma of wanting to be regarded as a nuclear disarmament leader while continuing to be protected by the US nuclear umbrella is for Japan to encourage the Obama administration to adopt a core deterrence policy accompanied by a no-first-use (NFU) declaration to avoid any ambiguity.

What, then, is Japan's position on US nuclear deterrence? In 1982 the government expressed its view that the US nuclear umbrella provides for a first use option in retaliation for an attack by conventional weapons. This explanation was made in response to a question raised by Diet member Takahiro Yokomichi on 19 February, 1982 concerning a statement made in the previous year by Eugene Rostow, Director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. Rostow had said that, as with its extended deterrence policy for West Europe (in existence since the 1950s), the United States would be prepared to use nuclear weapons if the Soviet Union attacked Japan with conventional weapons.[6] On 25 June, 1982, a government official told the Diet that this understanding was implied in a 1975 press statement issued jointly by President Gerald Ford and Prime Minister Takeo Miki.[7] The official said, referring to the joint statement: "We believe that in the sense that all the measures are included, it would mean that the nuclear deterrent or retaliation would not be limited to nuclear attacks against Japan."[8]

Later, on 5 August, 1998, in a meeting in Hiroshima organized by the Japan Congress Against Atomic & Hydrogen Bombs (Gensuikin), a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Yasunari Morino, explained why Japan did not join the New Agenda Coalition, a group of non-nuclear nations that had issued a declaration calling for a reinvigoration of efforts to build a world free of nuclear weapons in June 1998.[9] Confirming that the key stumbling block for Japan was the New Agenda Coalition's call for the nuclear-weapon states to commit to a no-first-use policy, Morino stated, "If you promised no first use, the effect of deterrence would be weakened considerably. We strongly doubt whether we could guarantee the security of Japan... Even if the US and Japan promised NFU, there is this question of whether other countries keep the promise of NFU or not."[10] By this time, with the cold war between the US and Soviet Union over, government officials and security experts in Japan started to have North Korea's chemical and biological weapons and China's conventional weapons build-up in mind.

More recently, when asked about encouraging the United States to adopt a no-first-use policy, Prime Minister Taro Aso told a press conference held on 9 August, 2009 in Nagasaki: "In international society, there exist large arsenals including nuclear forces... It could disturb the deterrence balance and undermine security to have a discussion separating nuclear weapons from other weapons". Reiterating what Masahiko Komura had said when Foreign Minister in 1999, Aso went on to say, "Even if a nuclear power says it won't make a preemptive strike, there's no way to verify its intentions. I wonder if that's a realistic way to ensure Japan's safety."

Such assertions about the difficulty of verifying a NFU declaration may have China in mind, as China has maintained a no-first-use policy since 1964. It should be noted that Japan's responses here confuse, intentionally or unintentionally, the no-first-use policies of an adversary, that is, China, and those of Japan's ally, the United States. Prime Minister Aso's remarks were made in response to a question about US policy, in the context of the US perhaps being able to make a contribution to the efforts toward global nuclear disarmament by declaring a no-first-use policy. It should be remembered that even if the US makes a no-first-use declaration, an adversary that threatened Japan with a nuclear attack would risk nuclear retaliation by the United States. This threat of

retaliation is supposed to work as a deterrent. Without entering into debate about whether such a retaliatory nuclear strike would be valid or appropriate, adoption of a no-first-use policy and core deterrence would not entail abandoning this threat.

In addition to the above-mentioned concerns about North Korea's chemical and biological weapons and the conventional weapons build-up in China, government officials and security experts in Japan have privately expressed fears about deeper reductions in US nuclear forces prompting China to increase or maintain its force structure with the intention of gaining a rough parity with the United States.

Taken together, it is clear that some Japanese officials are concerned about deep cuts in the US arsenal and the potential adoption of core deterrence and no-first-use policies. But at the same time, Japan has made statements supporting the prohibition of the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries. Ambassador Sumio Tarui, for example, said at a 2008 NPT Preparatory Committee session, "On signing the NPT in 1970, Japan emphasized in its official statement that 'the nuclear-weapon States must not have recourse to use nuclear weapons or threaten to use such weapons against non-nuclear-weapon States.' That position has remained unchanged, and Japan lends its basic support to the concept of negative security assurances (NSAs)."[11]

Behind the scenes, however, the concerns that Japan has conveyed to the United States contradict such assertions. In 2003, for example, the Yomiuri Shimbun reported, "Mitoji Yabunaka, director general of the Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, filed the request with James Kelly, US assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs... to make sure the United States does not again [as in 1994] promise not to use its nuclear weapons against North Korea if Pyongyang agrees to dismantle its nuclear development program."[12]

A further example is given by Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists. In his blog discussing nuclear-tipped Tomahawk land attack missiles (TLAM/N) Kristensen points out that Japan is being cited as the main reason for extending the life of the TLAM/N, which have been virtually retired since the days of President George H. W. Bush.[13] The final report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States of America, led by William J. Perry and James R. Schlesinger and published in 2009, says: "In Asia, extended deterrence relies heavily on the deployment of nuclear cruise missiles on some Los Angeles class attack submarines - the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile/Nuclear (TLAM/N). This capability will be retired in 2013 unless steps are taken to maintain it. U.S. allies in Asia are not integrated in the same way [as NATO countries] into nuclear planning and have not been asked to make commitments to delivery systems. In our work as a Commission it has become clear to us that some U.S. allies in Asia would be very concerned by TLAM/N retirement."[14]

Kristensen notes, "According to several sources, Japanese government officials provided the Commission with a written list of requirements for the nuclear umbrella." Such concerns have also been expressed by former Japanese government officials and security experts at international conferences.[15]

The importance of listening to Japan's concerns was explained by James Schlesinger in testimony on the Commission's report to the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee on 6 May, 2009. Schlesinger said that Japan "is the country that has perhaps the greatest leaning, amongst the 30 odd nations that we have under the umbrella, to create its own nuclear force, and therefore, intimate discussions with the Japanese, I think, are mandatory at this stage". Former Defense Secretary William Perry concurred, saying the consequence of failing to pay attention to allies' concerns "would be that those nations would feel that they had to provide their own deterrence. They would have to build their own nuclear weapons."[16]

This is not the first time that Japan has surfaced as a key element in the debate concerning US nuclear policies. On a visit to Japan in the summer of 1997, US Ambassador Thomas Graham, who had just stepped down as Special Representative of the President for Arms Control, Non-Proliferation, and Disarmament, emphasized that there were people in Washington who opposed a US declaration of no-first-use, saying that it might lead to US allies such as Japan and Germany acquiring nuclear weapons. Because of this, he stressed the need for the Japanese people to persuade their government to adopt a policy supporting no first use.

The last, but not the least, important question is how strong Japan's objections to US adoption of core deterrence and deeper nuclear weapons reductions are. Is it actually likely that if the United States adopts a core deterrence policy and makes a no-first-use declaration Japan would violate its NPT obligations and seek to acquire nuclear weapons against the wishes of the US and world opinion? Former Minister of Defence Shigeru Ishiba, who is known for his knowledge about nuclear and military affairs, has this to say about Japan exercising the option to develop nuclear weapons: "That would naturally mean Japan withdrawing from the NPT. We would not be able to obtain nuclear fuel... With dependency on nuclear power for about 40% of [our] electricity, we would experience a major decline in economic activities. Japan going nuclear would automatically mean the collapse of the NPT regime and there would be nuclear countries all around us."[17] Ishiba also noted: "Although the NPT regime is quite discriminatory it would be better than the whole world having nuclear weapons." "In any case, the voters would not allow such a thing as possession of nuclear weapons," observed Ishiba.[18]

There is a big difference between a theoretical possibility and a realistic probability of Japan 'going nuclear'. And let's remember that the core deterrence and no-first-use proposals do not in any way imply the cessation of the Japan-US security arrangements or a withdrawal of the US nuclear umbrella against possible nuclear attacks.

Given Japan's public rhetoric in favour of nuclear disarmament and the sensitivities attached to officials' contradictory concerns about US moves to reduce the salience and numbers of nuclear weapons, there is little transparency on this issue, making it impossible to gauge the level of importance that Japan has put on the US maintaining current doctrines and force structures or to have an informed discussion about it.

That may now change. While conservative sections of the Japanese political and military establishment may be opposed to the US adopting no-first-use and core deterrence policies, such views are by no means unanimous. On 30 August, 2009 the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) won a landslide victory in the general election, defeating the ruling Liberal Democrat Party (LDP), which had been in almost unbroken power since 1955. According to its nuclear policy determined in 2000, the DPJ supports no first use, a position that was underscored on 12 May, 2009 when DPJ Secretary-General Katsuya Okada (in line to become Foreign Minister at the time of writing) told a Diet session that "a norm not allowing at least the first use, or making it illegal to use nuclear weapons against countries not possessing nuclear weapons should be established. Japan should be at the forefront of this effort as a leader."[19] Just before the election, in response to a questionnaire organized by Peace Pledge Japan and Governance Design Laboratory, DPJ President Yukio Hatoyama also expressed the view that no-first-use policies should be pursued. In view of such positions, we can hope that the new coalition government will encourage the Obama administration to pursue nuclear disarmament and adopt appropriate policies to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons.[20] Whether or not the government gives active support to specific changes in US doctrine, it is unlikely to stand in the way if the Obama administration decides to adopt core deterrence and pursue deeper cuts in the US and Russian arsenals.

All these issues will feed into the US Nuclear Posture Review at some level. In order to make the

best possible contribution to this process, Japan should become more transparent about what it wants from the US in terms of extended deterrence and other security assurances. As Hirofumi Nakasone, then Minister for Foreign Affairs, stressed in his paper, Conditions towards Zero,[21] published on 27 April, 2009, transparency is key, both to the process of nuclear disarmament and to informed and democratic decision-making.

Japan faces genuine dilemmas, and there needs to be a more open and detailed public discussion about the implications of core deterrence and no first use. Such discussions should include the security benefits and significance of such policies as a concrete contribution a non-nuclear country like Japan could make to support global efforts toward the abolition of nuclear weapons. They should also take into account the negative implications if Japan stands in the way of US policy changes aimed at reducing the role of nuclear weapons and moving towards the international objective of a world free of nuclear weapons. If Japan continues to maintain that the US, with its world-largest and most sophisticated conventional forces, must have a first use option to deter attacks on Japan by chemical, biological and conventional weapons, the argument could easily be used by those seeking to have their own nuclear weapons. Furthermore, if Japan is seen as threatening to develop nuclear weapons if the US replaces its doctrine of nuclear first use with one of core deterrence, it could undermine the NPT as well as disarmament efforts, and would look as if Japan wants to hold on to nuclear weapons even if everybody else gave them up.

In parallel, the fear-mongering claims that Japan will want nuclear weapons if the US adopts a new policy need to be examined more rigorously. Misinterpretation of Japan's intentions should not become the reason for no change. Nor should Japan be used as an excuse by those who want to keep US nuclear policies stuck in the cold war.

III. Notes

[1] For example, Gregory Kulacki from the Union of Concerned Scientists, Frank von Hippel from Princeton University, and Leonor Tomero from the Center for Non-proliferation and Arms Control, who visited Japan in July-August period, told Japanese NGOs and media about this 'Japan' issue being raised in the context of the Nuclear Posture Review. Statements by Kulacki and von Hippel are available on YouTube:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=itFI87hixy0
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dek90712D2E .
See also: Joe Cirincione, 'The Pentagon's Nuclear Posture Landmine', Hufffington Post, 10 August, 2009, available at: www.huffingtonpost.com/joe-cirincione/ the-pentagons-nuclear-pos_b_255517.html .

[2] Committee on International Security and Arms Control, National Academy of Sciences, The Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy, 1997, p 15, available at:
www.puaf.umd.edu/Fetter/1997-fun.pdf .

[3] The policy of the three non-nuclear principles was first expressed by Prime Minister Eisaku Sato at the Diet on 11 December, 1967. See:
http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/syugiin/057/0514/05712110514002a.html .

[4] See: www.mofa.go.jp/announce/announce/2008/12/1185313_1080.html
www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/disarmament/arms/un0810.pdf .

[5] Sato explained the relationship between the nuclear umbrella and the principles as follows: "What should Japan do about its security under the three principles concerning nuclear weapons: not possessing, not producing, and not bringing in nuclear weapons? ...When I met President

Johnson last time in 1965, and this time too, I said: 'Could the Japan-U.S. security treaty defend Japan against any kind of attacks?' In other words, is it useful against nuclear attacks? President Johnson said [that the U.S.] will clearly defend Japan against any attacks." See: http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/syugiin/057/0514/05712110514002a.html .

[6] http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/syugiin/096/0380/09602190380013a.html .

[7] In part the Miki-Ford statement said, "In this connection, the President reassured the Prime Minister that the United States would continue to abide by its defense commitment to Japan under the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security in the event of armed attack against Japan, whether by nuclear or conventional forces." The Miki-Ford statement is available at: www.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~worldjpn/ documents/texts/JPUS/19750806.O1E.html .

[8] http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/syugiin/096/0380/09606250380022a.html .

[9] The June 1998 declaration, titled 'A Nuclear Weapons Free World: The Need for a New Agenda', was issued by the Foreign Ministers of Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Slovenia, South Africa and Sweden, though Slovenia subsequently dropped out to pursue NATO membership.

[10] Masa Takubo, 'Sensei Fushiyo Sengen to Nihon no Kakuseisaku' (NFU declaration and Japan's Nuclear Policy), Gunshuku Mondai Shiryo, November 1998. www.kakujoho.net/npt/nfu_gnsk.html .

[11] www.reachingcriticalwill.org/legal/npt/prepcom09/ statements/7MayNDNSA_Japan.pdf .

[12] 'Govt wants U.S. to keep North Korea N-deterrent', Daily Yomiuri 23 August, 2003.

[13] Hans Kristensen, 'Japan, TLAM/N, and Extended Deterrence', www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2009/07/tlam.php See also:Jeffrey Lewis, 'Japan, TLAM/N', www.armscontrolwonk.com/2284/japan-tlamn .

[14] The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, p 26, available at: http://media.usip.org/reports/strat_posture_report.pdf .

[15] See the following, for example: www.carnegieendowment.org/files/npc_extended_deterrence4.pdf ; http://csis.org/files/publication/issuesinsights_v09n14.pdf , http://csis.org/files/publication/issuesinsights_v09n12.pdf .

[16] http://armedservices.house.gov/hearing_information.shtml .

[17] Shigeru Ishiba and Kazuhisa Ogawa, Nhihon no Senso to Heiwa (Japan's war and peace), (Bijinesu Sha, 2009), p 284.

[18] For a comprehensive assessment of government responses to UNGA resolution 61/89 and position on all aspects of an ATT, see Control Arms Campaign, "A Global Arms Trade Treaty: What States Want," November 2007.

[19] Diet session, 12 May 2009. See http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/syugiin/171/0018/17105120018027a.html LDP member Taro Kono argued for a Japan-US joint declaration for NFU in the Diet in 1999. See: http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/syugiin/145/0005/14506020005008c.html .

[20] Since the DPJ does not have the majority in the Upper House it plans to form a coalition

government with two other parties; the Social Democratic Party (which has been calling for NFU policies) and the New People's Party (which supports NFU policies with the condition that deterrence is maintained). See: http://icnndngojapan.wordpress.com/2009/08/14/nuke_umbrella_answers/ .

[21] www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/disarmament/arms/state0904.html .

IV. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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