

Policy Forum 03-12A: Can Japan Go Nuclear In Months?

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Can Japan Go Nuclear In Months?

By Phar Kim Beng

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I. Introduction

The essay below is by Phar Kim Beng. Beng asserts that living next to North Korea, a threatening neighbor that has the means and intent to go nuclear, Japan has every reason to follow suit. However, there is a whole gamut of issues, political, strategic, psychological, and even technical, that Japan has to overcome before it can adopt a nuclear deterrent. Consequently, Japan cannot be a nuclear power in the foreseeable future. Beng is a Malaysian and former Asian Public Intellectual fellow attached to the United Nations University.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by Phar Kim Beng

"Can Japan Go Nuclear In Months?"

By Phar Kim Beng

v In light of the repeated threats by North Korea, there have been talks of Japan quickly going nuclear. Pyongyang's antics in lobbing missiles into the Sea of Japan in 1998, coupled with the latest developments with the Yongbyon nuclear reactor program, have made Japan more insecure than ever.

The totalitarian character of North Korea, fuelled by a hyper-nationalist ideology of 'ju'che' (self-reliance), has equally alarmed Japan. The opaque decision-making of North Korea's military and party-hierarchy further exacerbates the suspicion; as is North Korea's bloated defense budget where up to 25 % of its gross national product (GNP) is spent on military expenditure.

Living next to such a threatening neighbor, the possibility of Japan acquiring a nuclear deterrent seems logical enough. Invariably, it has been affirmed by many analysts that what is lacking in Japan is merely the 'political will' to acquire such a deterrent, not the technical ability.

Both arguments are, however, misplaced. If Japan does go nuclear, it will be a process achieved in decades; not months. Part of the prolonged conversion is technical too.

Indeed, contrary to a popular perception of a Japan that constantly bows to the dictates of others, Japan does possess the attendant political will to have a nuclear policy.

But, Tokyo is exercising the will not to assume too open a nuclear posture lest it gives the game away. To the extent, Japan feels it is compelled to have a nuclear policy, it relies on the extended deterrence provided by the United States.

Hence, despite widespread revulsion against nuclear weapons in Japan in response to the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, successive Japanese governments have done what is politically possible to support the United States' nuclear position internationally.

Specifically, Japan's cooperation with the United States includes support for the United States' positions on nuclear issues such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and a refusal to join informal international coalitions seeking to press for more vigorous steps towards the elimination of nuclear weapons. Documents released by the United States' government furthermore demonstrate that the Japanese government acquiesced to the U.S. practice of having U.S. ships with nuclear

weapons call at Japanese ports.

Thus, despite Japan's three non-nuclear principles that Japan "will not possess nuclear weapons or allow their introduction into Japan and that Japan will adhere to the non-proliferation treaty (NPT) and the CTBT," Japan is not absolutely without a nuclear option. Rather, one has to understand Japan's nuclear policy with much nuance.

A higher degree of confusion surrounds Japan's technical ability, however. It is said that Japan could easily convert its reactor-grade plutonium (RGPu) stockpile to weapons grade plutonium (WGPu). That this might be the case is not disputed. But there is a missing piece in this analysis.

As Mataka Kamiya, one of the leading scholars on Japan's nuclear policy wrote: "Although some kind of small-scale nuclear bomb production with reactor grade plutonium may be possible, experts generally agree that bomb production with this kind of plutonium involves an extremely dangerous technological process and that such bombs are likely to be too unstable and too militarily unreliable to be deployed as actual warheads. In fact, no country has ever tried to produce nuclear weapons with reactor-grade plutonium."

To which he continued: "Neither can Japan convert its H-2 rocket into a form for military use. Liquid oxygen and liquid hydrogen, the fuels used to power Japan's H-2, must be maintained at extremely low temperatures. Because maintaining the huge H 2 at these temperatures for extended periods of time is practically impossible, technicians must first cool the H-2's fuel tanks before they are filled, shortly before launch, a process that requires at least a few hours."

Yet, as one is aware, for a nuclear deterrent to be effective and credible, the launch or the threat of destruction must be instantaneous. As it is, for the lack of a better option, Japan has decided to rely on the extended deterrence provided by the United States for two reasons. First of all, the threat faced by Japan and the United States is not exactly disproportionate.

In the event of a North Korean nuclear attack, the United States' forces stationed in Japan would be at the receiving end. The United States, therefore, have an incentive to make its nuclear deterrent credible to North Korea. Secondly, granted that the Japanese public is psychologically averse to any open nuclear policy, it is in the favor of the Japanese government to make its position low-keyed, almost subtle.

How then do we interpret the statements of Japanese politicians and government officials? Haven't leading politicians such as Ichiro Ozawa, president of the Liberal Party, spoke of how "easy for Japan to produce nuclear warheads" to deter North Korea, but also an "inflated China?"

In May 2002, a month after the Ozawa statement, haven't Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda and Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinizo Abe both affirmed that the Japanese Constitution permits possession of nuclear weapons ? Within reason, these statements were all made correctly.

But as shown above, producing nuclear warheads is not sufficient to weaponize the entire system. They have to be deliverable and deployable too. Yet, Japan is no larger than the size of Montana. It only has a thin sliver of land.

Land-based missiles would not permit a retaliatory capability. Air-launched missiles would not have the adequate warning to allow the deploying aircraft to scramble to secure locations. Submarine-based missiles, on the other hand, require extensive infra-structural support that Japan currently has none.

Nor does the constitutional sanction allowed in producing nuclear weapons necessarily imply that Japan can go nuclear at the instant. It can't. As Brad Glosserman, the Director of Research of Pacific Forum, noted: "The charge that the government's three non nuclear principles---for which Prime Minister Eisaku Sato won the Nobel Peace Prize---can be forgotten when convenient is another way of saying Japan is not a democracy." Translation: Japan's public opinion cannot be easily overturned even if there be ground for Japan to possess nuclear weapons.

Ozawa's statement should also not taken at face value. Prior to leading the Liberal Party, Ozawa was the secretary general of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). When Ozawa splitted acrimoniously from LDP, he had to stake out his own political vision; one distinct from his old LDP faction leaders such as Shin Kanemaru and Noboru Takeshita. Hence, Ozawa's position became more hardline after 1994 plausibly due to domestic reasons.

But if the international community feels that Japan is now feeling its way towards having nuclear weapons, this view is much mistaken too. It is a projection of what Japan would logically do, not based on empirical evidence.

In fact, various studies, secretly conducted or otherwise, have shown that the tactical gains in having nuclear weapons in Japan far outweigh the strategic merits. If Japan acquires nuclear deterrent, the risk of proliferation in the entire Northeast Asia will increase accordingly. This would decrease, rather than increase, Japan's overall security.

III. 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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