

Japan and the Nuclear Challenge in a New Era of Rising Tensions

Balancing Between Disarmament and Deterrence

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Following the rapid succession of diplomatic developments between North Korea, South Korea, and the United States, Japan's security position has become more delicate. Former Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera stated in May 2018 that Japan is facing its toughest security environment since World War II and pledged to resolutely protect the nation's territory. At the same time, China's aggressive posture in the East and South China Seas and its rapidly expanding military budget pose constant concerns for Japan. Along with challenges, however, opportunities have also emerged for rethinking Japan's nuclear security policy in this new era of post-Cold War uncertainty. In the wake of the Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty (NWBT), passed in July 2017, nuclear disarmament movements have started to grow remarkably and are pressuring the Japanese government to join the treaty. Japan's status as a nuclear umbrella state highlights once again the country's postwar security dilemma between maintaining nuclear deterrence in the short term and seeking nuclear disarmament in the long run.

This article will first examine how Japanese officials and experts have perceived the US security guarantee to their country and the nuclear component of extended deterrence. Subsequently, it will discuss the obstacles that Japan faces to balance the two goals of its nuclear policy. Lastly, it will study how Japan can contribute to the creation of a more favorable regional environment for nuclear disarmament and ensure that the disarmament side of the country's policy does not remain neglected.

These challenges and opportunities, combined with the revision in December 2018 of Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines, constitute a crucial time to think of some steps Japan can take today and in the upcoming years to strike a better balance between deterrence and disarmament.

Background

When I told a former high-ranking Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) official that I wanted to understand how Japan balances its deterrence needs with its disarmament goals, he responded that there was nothing to understand,

investigate, or discuss about it, as Japan is “simply stuck pursuing both aspects of its nuclear policy in the same way. End of story.”¹ Albeit disappointing at first, his response highlights one of the core dilemmas encompassed in Japan’s nuclear policy and urges us to question the way the country has been dealing with both of these goals. Is Japan indeed pursuing disarmament and deterrence in the same way?

Disentangling Japan’s nuclear policy is no easy task. The Four Pillars of Nuclear Policy (*Kaku Yon Seisaku*), introduced by former Prime Minister Eisaku Satō in January 1968 as a wider framework for the Three Non-Nuclear Principles (*Hikaku San Gensoku*), perfectly reflects the various discrepancies embedded in Japanese nuclear policy. As the only country that has experienced nuclear attacks on its own soil, Japan officially positions itself as a nuclear victim (*hibakukoku*) and considers the Three Non-Nuclear Principles as the cornerstone of its nonnuclear policy (the first pillar). Japan’s nuclear *kokuze* (national policy) assigns exclusively peaceful purposes to the country’s atomic energy program (the second pillar), but the political rhetoric on the nuclear option and the government’s past nuclear studies always introduce doubts regarding Japan’s commitment to this *kokuze*. Moreover, Japan’s role in promoting disarmament (the third pillar) is sometimes seen by neighboring countries and domestic peace activists as hypocritical, as the country also heavily relies on the extended nuclear deterrence (END) provided by the United States (the fourth pillar).

This article focuses on the dilemma that the last two pillars pose between maintaining the credibility of US extended deterrence while taking concrete steps toward nuclear disarmament. The first section will examine how Japanese government officials have perceived the US extended deterrence, and in particular its nuclear component. The subsequent section will tackle the rise and fall of the global nuclear disarmament movement around 2009 and the deterrence vs. disarmament dichotomy in Japanese thinking. The final section will attempt to provide recommendations on how Japan could regain the lost momentum while maintaining a strong security alliance with the United States.

Japan’s Perception of US Extended Deterrence and Its Nuclear Component

The role of the postwar US security guarantee to Japan, and in particular its nuclear component, has sometimes been compared to a lid that prevents the return of a militarist Japan—and Tokyo’s acquisition of nuclear capabilities of its own. For the United States, the main objective of the postwar US-Japan alliance was a double containment: on the one hand, against the communist bloc, and on

the other hand, against the return of a militarist Japan.² This would in fact be the core meaning of the Security Treaty signed by the United States and Japan on 8 September 1951: by sealing a formal agreement, the United States sought to simultaneously defend themselves against a communist encroachment as well as controlling any straying in the future path of Japan.³

Because of the constant US engagement in the postwar era, Japan's Cold War foreign and security policies remained limited and reliant on the United States, allowing the emergence of Japan's pacifist identity in the aftermath of World War II.⁴ Edwin O. Reischauer, one of the most renowned Western scholars of Japan and former US ambassador to Tokyo (1961–1966), stated in the late 1980s that “today no people surpass the Japanese in their devotion to pacifism. It is their great ideal, supported by both their emotions and their intellects.”⁵ While not so confident about it in his early postwar work, Reischauer seemed to have come to such a conclusion after seeing Japan's foreign and security policies so immobile for decades during the Cold War.⁶

Throughout the Cold War and the post-Cold War era, the Japanese government has indeed been careful to reflect the general public's widespread pacifist sentiment developed after the war and to maintain the country's official status as *hibakukoku*. However, that also meant that the Japanese government had to ensure the security needs of the country, i.e., testing the credibility of the US commitment to extend deterrence to Japan. Indeed, the statements suggesting a possible nuclear option for Japan appear to be linked to the Japanese government's need to periodically survey the degree of the US commitment.

According to a 1971 airgram from the US embassy in Tokyo to the Department of State, for instance, Shintarō Ishihara, then a promising young Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politician, claimed “a Japanese nuclear system was necessary in order to trigger the American deterrent in case Japan was attacked or seriously threatened because the American nuclear umbrella, as presently constituted, was not, for Japan, a reliable deterrent.”⁷ Interestingly, the US embassy comments in the airgram that Ishihara has little political influence in his own party, and he is literally the only one who publicly advocates nuclear weapons for Japan. However, the missive continued, by stating it is possible that “Ishihara's popularity as a culture hero will enable him to convince his large following among Japanese youth that Japan should go nuclear. Should he be able to do so, others competing politicians might also find it politically profitable to advocate such a program or, failing that, to argue against closing Japan's options by ratifying the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). . . . Ishihara's doubts about US credibility are another matter. They are considerably more widely held, even though few Japanese would articulate them as frankly as Ishihara did.”⁸ Many of these political comments questioning the US

security commitment and simultaneously alluding to Japan's nuclearization, in fact, are aimed at the United States and have been a subtle way to request stronger extended deterrence guarantees at a specific point in time. A more recent example came in the wake of the 2006 North Korean nuclear test. Even after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had visited Tokyo and publicly reassured Japan of the solidity of the END to Japan in October 2006, more Japanese politicians felt the need to test the US commitment. Shōichi Nakagawa, for instance, at the time policy chief of the LDP, stated in November 2006 that Japan should at least discuss the nuclear option because North Korean nuclear-tipped missiles could reach Japan before the United States could help their ally.⁹ Foreign Minister Tarō Asō also sparked a controversy¹⁰ as he offered his support to Nakagawa's statements and called for a more open debate on the nuclear option because of the threatening environment.¹¹ These statements are a sign that, despite coming to the conclusion that the only possible security option at the moment is strengthening the alliance with the United States, Japan could not fully and completely rely on its ally for protection. This lingering and underlying mistrust toward the American security guarantee, fomented since the late 1980s by the bitter feelings of Japan bashing then Japan passing,¹² is a leitmotiv in the US–Japan security alliance that can be found in more recent years as well. When Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and Adm Harry Harris, then commander of the US Pacific Command, met in Tokyo after North Korea's nuclear test in January 2016 and a ballistic missile launch in February, Abe stated, "The missile launch by North Korea was not only a direct threat to Japan but also a challenge to the United States."¹³ Political scientist Shōgo Imoto writes that "it is clearly an exaggeration to state that Mr. Abe is thinking of nuclear weapons for Japan. However, I interpret [Mr. Abe's quote] as the following: "If the United States abandons Japan now and runs away from the North Korean threat, Japan will seriously consider a shift in its policy and acquire nuclear weapons. United States, I would like you to be fully aware of this as you tackle the North Korean issue."¹⁴ The classic debate on the Japanese nuclear option and the relatively recent awareness for a public nuclear discussion by Japanese politicians¹⁵ have, therefore, a twofold purpose. The most obvious one is deterring Japan's regional rivals and sending them the message that should a crisis occur, Japan's nuclear latency can be turned into nuclear weapons very quickly. The second purpose is to constantly gauge the level of security commitment from the United States. Japan's historical fear of abandonment is now complemented by a fear of a new potential "Japan passing" moment with the Trump administration. The idea that the United States will downgrade the security alliance with Japan in favor of other priorities is currently very alive. Journalist Takao Toshikawa even used the phrase *Japan dissing* to describe this rough patch with the United States.¹⁶ A 2015 survey by the Pew

Research Center shows that when asked “if your country and China got into a serious military conflict, do you think the US would defend your country militarily?” 60 percent of the Japanese respondents answered “yes.” While it might seem like a significant number, the participants from South Korea and the Philippines responded, respectively, 73 percent and 66 percent.¹⁷

This Japanese modus operandi of regularly requesting US reassurance about its extended deterrence is especially interesting if we examine its nuclear component. Since the horrors of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, then the *Lucky Dragon #5* incident in 1954,¹⁸ there has been a sharp divide between the nuclear abolitionists, who reject all nuclear weapons, and the realists, whose main concern is to respond to Japan’s security needs, for example, maintaining a strong and credible US deterrent to counter threats from China, North Korea, and Russia. The realist view, which sees extended deterrence as a necessity, has dominated in the LDP-run governments, and the issue of “no first use” (NFU)¹⁹ has become fundamental for them. In 1994, Shunji Yanai, a senior government official, expressed his fears that the US–North Korea Agreed Framework would undermine nuclear deterrence against any type of attack from North Korea.²⁰ When US Amb. Robert Gallucci proposed that Washington drop all threats of first use once North Korea complied with the NPT, Yanai strongly opposed the idea because it would “punch a hole in the American nuclear umbrella.”²¹

In 2003, prior to the first Six-Party Talks, the director-general of the MOFA’s Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, Mitoji Yabunaka, asked Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly “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.”²² Implicitly referring to China’s unverifiable and unenforceable declaratory NFU policy, former Prime Minister Tarō Asō also commented, “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.”²³

This security-centered approach, prevailing in the conservative LDP governments, persisted even in 2009, a few months before the elections brought to power the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) for the first time. Masakatsu Ōta of *Kyodo News* revealed in November 2009 that Japanese diplomats conducted aggressive lobbying activities on the US congressional nuclear task force and asserted that they believed the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile/Nuclear (TLAM/N) was an essential element to maintain the credibility of the US nuclear umbrella against China and North Korea.²⁴

The tune changed dramatically when the newly elected progressive government led by Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama attempted to reverse the Japanese

narrative on the retirement of the TLAM/N. In a December 2009 letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, then Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada suggested opening discussions for the adoption of a US NFU, which, in his view, would move Japan one step closer to its goal of promoting a nuclear-free world.²⁵ This effort, however, was short-lived. As the DPJ was defeated in 2012, Shinzō Abe's government again showed a realist approach, speaking against the possibility of an NFU policy for the US.

After Pres. Barack Obama's historical visit to Hiroshima on 27 May 2016, his administration attempted to include the NFU policy into the US nuclear declaratory policy. However, the main reason why the adoption of such policy became difficult to implement was, again, Japan's concerns. The Japanese government's belief was that adopting an NFU policy would weaken the perception of American commitment to Japan's defense.²⁶

This pattern clearly shows that the NFU policy is a key issue in Japan's strategic thinking and stems from the deep mistrust that the Japanese government feels toward China's 1964 declaratory NFU policy. However, even with an untrustworthy China, Japan's firm opposition to the adoption of an NFU policy by the US seems outdated at a time when Japan is gradually making efforts to strengthen its defense posture and become a more proactive player.

Japan's official goal of promoting disarmament or being the mediator (*hashi-watashi*) between nuclear states and nonnuclear ones is being chipped away at by the importance Japan still assigns to the nuclear component of the US deterrent, thus trapping Japan in a permanent dilemma between vanishing long-term disarmament goals and the fear of abandonment stemming from short-term security needs.

The Lost Momentum and the Security vs. Disarmament Dichotomy

In September 2001, historian and author of an official Nobel Peace Prize history Oivind Stenersen told reporters that former Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Satō was the Committee's "biggest mistake." The Three Non-Nuclear Principles policy had earned Eisaku Satō the Nobel Peace Prize on 11 December 1974, exactly seven years after his declaration of the country's nonnuclear policy. According to the Committee at the time, Satō represented the will for peace of the Japanese people, and his work was to be considered a great step toward nuclear disarmament and peace.²⁷ The prize was also awarded to him for his efforts in signing the NPT in 1970 and for establishing Japan's official nonnuclear policy. Stenersen criticized the Committee's choice, noting that awarding the prize to Satō was, in fact, not received warmly in Japan, either by the public or by the left-wing parties.²⁸ His opponents questioned how a strong supporter of US military actions in Asia and

of the US nuclear deterrent was deserving of such an honor.²⁹ The book states, “Some reacted with disbelief, others with laughter and anger,” adding that Japanese women’s organizations also contested the prize to Satō because he had supported the United States in the Vietnam War.³⁰

The dilemma between pacifism and security is in fact also translated into the catch-22 that still finds the Japanese government constantly juggling between disarmament and deterrence. Former Hiroshima mayor Takashi Hiraoka’s frustrated comment that “people from other countries point out that Japan preaches to others about abolishing nuclear weapons while, at the same time, it relies on US nuclear arms for its own security. . . . When I tell them that the citizens of Japan are doing their utmost for peace, they aren’t convinced and dismiss this as double-talk” expresses the powerlessness felt by many disarmament activists in Japan.³¹ The government, in fact, has created a conceptual division that does not see deterrence and disarmament as conflicting.

As shown earlier in this article, government officials and policy experts see them as two different and coexisting components of the country’s nuclear policy. Disarmament and deterrence are thus seen as both equally indispensable for Japan, and not at all inconsistent.³² In May 2018 at a conference in Washington, DC, Amb. Kazutoshi Aikawa, deputy chief of mission at the Japanese embassy to the United States, stated

pursuing the goal of disarmament cannot and should not be conducted without taking into account the security considerations and implications. In the same vein, maintaining a robust and credible extended deterrence and pursuing the disarmament goal are not contradictory. . . . As Japan, a non-nuclear state under the NPT, faces such serious security challenges and threats . . . its disarmament policy cannot and should not be pursued without giving due consideration to its security concerns. To ensure its security against such regional security concerns, the extended deterrence is imperative for Japan. That, however, does not mean in any way that Japan is just reactive or takes the security situations as given. On the contrary, Japan proactively pursues its diplomatic undertakings to improve the security situation regionally and globally, in joint efforts toward creating the condition to build a world without nuclear weapons.³³

This conceptual distinction echoes with Anthony DiFilippo’s description of Japan’s approach as “selective disarmament” that makes neighboring states call Japan out on its perceived hypocrisy or even wonder what Japan’s real intentions are. Japan has always remained silent whenever the United States conducted nuclear experiments,³⁴ with the exception of the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

who wrote letters of protest to the US president.³⁵ As Hiroshima governor Hidehiko Yuzaki (LDP) stated in 2016,

There is definitely a gap in perception between Hiroshima and the rest of Japan on nuclear-weapon issues. Living in Hiroshima makes it feel like everyone in Japan is naturally thinking about nuclear issues, but when I get out of my city, I have to readjust to the general national lack of awareness of these important issues. This is also evident in the way the media reports about the annual Hiroshima Peace Memorial Ceremony, for example: Hiroshima is the only city that shows the entire ceremony on TV, while the NHK in Tokyo only dedicates twenty minutes to it. In other parts of Japan they don't even talk about it!³⁶

Additionally, even within Hiroshima, there are clashing positions regarding the question of disarmament. In fact, while Governor Yuzaki agrees with the ruling LDP's line that disarmament should follow a step-by-step cooperation process, others, including former mayor Hiraoka, believe the government should take a bolder stance and start declaring immediately that it will be striving toward the complete abolition of all nuclear weapons and propose a specific timeline for this goal.³⁷

President Obama's 5 April 2009 speech in Prague represented an important symbolical moment for disarmament movements around the world. His speech was very well-received globally and in Japan and launched an international momentum by giving visibility and hope to existing disarmament movements such as Global Zero.³⁸ Nagasaki mayor Tomihisa Taue took the opportunity to publicly emphasize the importance of the message spread by the *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors). Taue stated, "The hopes of these citizens have been raised by the words of United States President Barack Obama, who proclaimed in Prague this April that the United States will take concrete steps toward a world without nuclear weapons."³⁹ Similarly, Hiroshima mayor Tadatoshi Akiba coined a new term, the "Obamajority," to refer to the increasing number of nuclear abolitionists around the world, explaining that President Obama "is the one who has given all of us new energy and hope that we can and must abolish all nuclear weapons from the surface of this earth."⁴⁰

On the other hand, Tokyo remained cautious and very conservative in its security-centered posture. A 3 September 2009 secret cable sent to Secretary Clinton indicated that the LDP government, right before losing the election later that month, was effectively discouraging President Obama from visiting Hiroshima in November, where he might have reiterated his message in favor of a nuclear-free world.⁴¹ As shown earlier, the global disarmament momentum launched by the

Prague speech coincided in Japan with the brief shift in the government in 2009–2012, which strived to increase transparency and attempted to emphasize the goal of disarmament within the *kokuze*.

With North Korea resuming its missile tests coinciding again with the LDP regaining power, Japan has predictably shifted its emphasis back to security needs, and disarmament seems to have taken many steps backward. The “step-by-step” approach to disarmament that the current Japanese government has been promoting, in fact, espouses this shift and prioritizes deterrence in the short term while maintaining a long-term vision for disarmament. An example of the challenge that this stance poses is Japan’s 25 October 2016 vote at the United Nations Assembly General against the initiative to launch negotiations on a nuclear weapons ban. Japan, along with four of the nuclear states (United States, Great Britain, France, and Russia), decided to vote against the proposed resolution because the government would prefer a step-by-step approach to nuclear disarmament, which some have called not only disappointing, but also hypocritical. Tokyo’s move was criticized as it only reflects the government’s reliance on US END, while stripping the country of moral credibility in its disarmament efforts.⁴² At the press conference held three days after the vote, Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, who is originally from Hiroshima and has always highlighted this personal detail in his political career, stated, “Japan’s actions and position have been consistent throughout. Our position is to emphasize cooperation between nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states.”⁴³ Again, the issue of the NWBT, adopted in July 2017, has created a divide between the government and the public opinion and especially peace activists in Japan. The vocal Japanese branch of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) has been leading a pressure campaign against the Japanese government to join the NWBT as soon as possible, because Japan’s reputation as an atomic victim is at stake.⁴⁴ The disarmament vs. deterrence issue has also divided Japanese scholars and experts into two categories, those who study disarmament (*gunshuku*) and those who study deterrence (*yokushi*). As Takushoku University professor Heigo Satō comments, “there are two academic communities dealing with nuclear issues in Japan: the ‘disarmament’ camp, and the ‘deterrence’ one, and they do not talk to each other.” The two communities have their own events and conferences and have not attempted to find a common platform to discuss the two issues together.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the two MOFA bureaus who work on the issues, the North American Affairs Bureau and the Disarmament, Non-Proliferation, and Science Department, neither interact nor feel the need to consult each other.⁴⁶

Another setback for the recent disarmament movement is the discrepancy between the “Three Disarmament Reductions” (the three Rs) proposed by former

Foreign Minister Kishida in 2014, and the way MOFA reacted to the Trump administration's *Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)* in 2018. The three Rs suggest that to accomplish the goal of disarmament, there should be

1. a reduction of the number of nuclear weapons;
2. the reduction of the role of nuclear weapons; and
3. the reduction of the incentive for possession of nuclear weapons.⁴⁷



US Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Juan Torres

Figure 1. Trump visits Yokota Air Base, Japan. Pres. Donald J. Trump greets Lt Gen Jerry P. Martinez, US Forces Japan and 5th Air Force commander, during a Troop Talk, 5 November 2017, at Yokota Air Base, Japan. During his talk, Trump highlighted the importance of the US–Japan alliance in the Indo-Pacific region.

Current Foreign Minister Tarō Kōno, however, released an immediate statement the morning after the Trump administration's *NPR* was issued on 2 February 2018, stating, "Japan highly appreciates the latest *NPR* which clearly articulates the US resolve to ensure the effectiveness of its deterrence and its commitment to providing extended deterrence to its allies including Japan. . . . Japan will strengthen the deterrence of the Japan-US Alliance by closely consulting on the extended deterrence, including nuclear deterrence, through the Japan-US Extended Deterrence Dialogue and other consultations." The statement ends with "Japan, as a leading state towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons, will continue to closely cooperate with the US to promote realistic and tangible nuclear disarmament,

while appropriately addressing the actual security threats.”⁴⁸ ICAN vice-chair Akira Kawasaki pointed out the “worrying discrepancy” between the second point of the Three Rs and the fact that the Trump *NPR* has virtually given a greater role to nuclear weapons.⁴⁹ Kawasaki also expressed concern that the government’s continuous mixed signals are a sign that Japan’s step-by-step process is in fact a one step forward, two step backward approach with regards to disarmament.⁵⁰

This persisting conceptual distinction, therefore, created by the Japanese government to be able to pursue the two goals simultaneously, has had the effect of maintaining both a strong pacifist national identity and a solid alliance with the United States. The 2013 and the latest 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines state, “In dealing with the threat of nuclear weapons, US extended deterrence, *with nuclear deterrence at its core*, is essential: Japan will closely cooperate with the United States to maintain and enhance its credibility. To deal with the threat, Japan will also increase its own efforts including comprehensive air and missile defense as well as civil protection. At the same time, toward the long-term goal of bringing about a world free of nuclear weapons, Japan will play an active and positive role in nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.”⁵¹ (emphasis added)

Indeed, as the most-recent developments with North Korea have shown, deterrence is certainly still an essential tool. Extended deterrence dialogues between the United States and Japan are crucial to maintain a credible deterrence mechanism understood by both allies and keep the dialogue open between them. However, as Japan is making efforts to undertake a more proactive role in defense matters, Tokyo also needs to take on greater responsibility to promote nuclear disarmament. Thus, Japan’s dualistic approach seems inevitable, yet how can Japanese nuclear *kokuze* maintain a better balance between the two goals?

How to Ensure That the Goal of Disarmament Does Not Remain Neglected?

Commenting on the role of mediator (*hashiwatashi*) that Japan aspires to play, Prof. Tatsujirō Suzuki of Nagasaki University said, “Being a bridge-builder does not mean that Japan just takes the middle ground between nuclear weapons states and non-nuclear weapons states.”⁵² Clarifying the meaning of the phrase *hashiwatashi* has been challenging. While the MOFA had used the expression “leader for non-proliferation and disarmament” to describe Japan’s aspired role since the 1990s, in 2016 the MOFA changed it to “mediator.” This new role may imply a more concrete and realistic perspective, which resonates not only with Japan’s heightened regional threat perception but also with the deepening gap between

nuclear and nonnuclear states. However, the repeated emphasis solely on security has had the effect of pushing the goal of disarmament further in the background and driving a wedge between the government and the public.

Frictions rose in January 2018 when the MOFA declined the requests from ICAN to schedule a meeting between Prime Minister Abe and ICAN executive director Beatrice Fihn, who visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki for the first time.⁵³ Atomic bomb survivor and well-known antinuclear activist Setsuko Thurlow was also denied a meeting with the prime minister in December 2018. Thurlow later stated that she was disappointed that Abe was not able to meet her, and submitted a letter addressed to the prime minister, in which she wrote that she felt “betrayed as an atomic bomb survivor. . . . I request that Japan break from its dependence on the nuclear deterrent and deepen true conversation and consultation, not as a fake mediator, with atomic bomb survivors and civil society organizations.”⁵⁴

These missed opportunities for dialogue are indeed problematic. The government conveys its lack of confidence by showing that its only priority and concern is maintaining the US deterrent. Whether the reason why the prime minister declined these requests is scheduling conflicts or avoiding dialogue with antinuclear activists, the message that the domestic and international publics see is that the Japanese government is eclipsing the country’s identity as an A-bomb survivor. The *hibakukoku* status of Japan has played a major role in the country’s postwar identity. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which in Japanese are written in katakana as opposed to the kanji that simply indicate the cities, have been used by politicians as a symbol of Japanese uniqueness over the decades. “The only country that has been subjected to atomic bombing” (“唯一の被爆国”—*yuiitsu no hibakukoku*) is a very common phrase that many politicians have used in public statements. The phrase started being commonly used in the 1970s, after Japanese prime ministers began attending the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Ceremony. The first prime minister to attend the ceremony on 6 August 1971 was Eisaku Satō, who had declared the Three Non-Nuclear Principles four years prior. Since that year, in fact, the phrase has become popular in most Peace Memorial Speeches every year in August, and every prime minister since at least 1998 has included the phrase in his Peace Memorial Speech.

Therefore, one way the Japanese government could ensure that the proclaimed goal of disarmament is not neglected is to engage in public opportunities for dialogue with the *hibakusha* community and open a more transparent conversation about ways Japan can serve as mediator in NWBT discussions. In the official statement on the Nobel Peace Prize to ICAN, the MOFA’s foreign press secretary declared, “Although ICAN’s activities to date are different from the Japanese government’s approach, we share the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons.”⁵⁵ If the

government acknowledges this shared goal, then mitigating the gap with the antinuclear community through an increased mutual engagement would be beneficial to maintain an open dialogue on security and disarmament.

Another important element the Japanese government needs to discuss further is the nuclear component of the extended deterrent. As examined earlier, Japanese officials have often emphasized their opposition to a potential US NFU policy and their insistence on nuclear capabilities. As former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy Elaine Bunn suggests, "I'd say to the Japanese, don't hang your hat on a specific capability; don't put too much emphasis on any one weapon or platform."⁵⁶ Although Japan has been under the American security umbrella since the outset of the Cold War, it was only in 2010 that the two allies, through the Extended Deterrence Dialogue, started an official dialogue specifically on deterrence. Because this dialogue is still relatively new and officials and experts in Tokyo have long been reticent to talk about nuclear deterrence issues, thoughts on the details of deterrence mechanisms need to be worked out in a more pragmatic manner.⁵⁷ How effective is the current END to Japan in containing or countering threats from North Korea, China, or Russia? How would the United States realistically use nuclear weapons in contingencies involving the Senkaku Islands, or other critical areas?⁵⁸ Posing specific questions would also encourage Japanese government officials to organize and engage in more domestic and multilateral tabletop exercises, which are currently lacking.⁵⁹ These simulations would help update and reevaluate the actual role of nuclear weapons in both American and Japanese thinking, thus bringing the two sides of the same coin, deterrence and disarmament, closer together.

Lastly, strengthening confidence-building measures and trust in the region is a necessary aspect that would also help Tokyo strike a better balance between the two sides of Japan's nuclear policy. Japanese officials mostly feel that their country is impotent in promoting disarmament, because it does not possess nuclear weapons.⁶⁰ However, Japan's history as a *hibakukoku* is a very powerful tool in building trust, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, and not only through an annual speech at the United Nations. Easing tensions and reestablishing constructive relations with South Korea is imperative for Japan and for the region's stability, as well as finally reopening an official dialogue with North Korea.



DOD photo by Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Dominique A. Pineiro


Figure 2. Multilateral meeting. Commander US Forces Korea, Gen Vincent K. Brooks; US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Joseph F. Dunford Jr.; Japan Self-Defense Force Chief of Staff, Adm Katsutoshi Kawano; Republic of Korea (ROK) Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Jeong Kyeong-doo; Commander, US Pacific Command (USPACOM), Adm Harry Harris; and Commander US Forces Japan, Lt Gen Jerry P. Martinez gather for a trilateral meeting at USPACOM headquarters. The 30 October 2017 session was the fifth between the senior most US, ROK, and Japanese military officers since July 2014. The leaders discussed multilateral and bilateral initiatives designed to improve interoperability and readiness as well as North Korea’s long-range ballistic missile and nuclear tests and agreed to firmly respond to the acts in full coordination with each other. Dunford reaffirmed the ironclad commitment of the United States to defend the ROK and Japan and provide extended deterrence guaranteed by the full spectrum of US military capabilities.

Conclusion

Masakatsu Ōta has an expression for the dance the Japanese government has been performing under the US nuclear umbrella by finding a continuity between the past, the present, and the future of the “US-Japan nuclear alliance”—the “Nuclear Kabuki Play.” He argues that this play has two distinct audiences: the United States and the antinuclear domestic public. This separation, according to the journalist, conveniently enables the Japanese government to simultaneously address the issue of national security on the one hand and appease the antinuclear

sentiment of the public on the other hand.⁶¹ However, since the momentum in favor of disarmament started 10 years ago, this Nuclear Kabuki Play has been performing for only one audience; thus, neglecting the domestic audience. The usual speeches on disarmament with which the Japanese government has tried to appease the domestic public once or twice a year do not seem to be enough anymore, and the NWBT issue has exacerbated the tensions between the government and the public. Contrary to what the anonymous former MOFA official mentioned earlier in this article suggested, deterrence and disarmament are not being pursued in the same way.

Echoing former Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera's assessment, in August 2018 Prime Minister Abe stated that "the security environment of Japan is becoming more severe and increasingly uncertain."⁶² A more challenging environment is certainly a valid reason to strengthen responses to security needs, but it is also a great opportunity to initiate efforts to ease tensions in the region, open a dialogue with the domestic public, and rethink deterrence mechanisms for specific scenarios in cooperation with the United States.

Becoming more proactive in global disarmament does not mean compromising the US–Japan alliance or the security umbrella. With Japan becoming increasingly ready to take on a more "normal" role in the alliance and on the global scene, Japan's confidence in promoting disarmament will also need to grow at the same pace. 

Notes

1. Author's interview with former MOFA official who prefers to stay anonymous, 4 December 2018.

2. Timothy Temerson, *Double Containment and the Origins of the U.S.–Japan Security Alliance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT-Japan Program, 1991), 91–94, <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/17094>. Temerson attributes the phrase "double containment" to then-Secretary of State Dean Acheson.

3. Ibid. Richard Samuels also points out three scenarios that the United States feared at the time: firstly, the possibility of Japan's rapid remilitarization, which could eventually escalate into a revanchist military attack against the United States; secondly, a deeply unstable Japan that would have needed strong US attention for years to come; and finally, the possibility that Japan could secure a separate peace with the communist countries and allow them easy access for political and industrial influences. See Richard Samuels, *Securing Japan – Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 39.

4. See Peter J. Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Peter J. Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara, "Japan's National Security: Structures, Norms, and Policies," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (Spring 1993): 84–113; and Thomas U. Berger, "From Sword to Chrysanthemum: Japan's Culture of Anti-Militarism," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (Spring 1993): 119–50.

5. Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity* (London: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1988), 352.

6. In his earlier works, and particularly in *Japan Present and Past*, 1946, republished in 1961 when he was Pres. John F. Kennedy's ambassador to Japan, Reischauer seems to have had a more cautious stance on Japan's will to maintain the same pacifist constitution.

7. Airgram from US Embassy in Tokyo to Department of State, Subject: "LDP Dietman Shintaro Ishihara's arguments for a Japanese nuclear force", 19 February 1971, NND 969023, Box 1752, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

8. Ibid.

9. Elaine Lies, "Japan Policy Chief Wants China 'Discipline,'" *Reuters*, 13 November 2006.

10. See October 2006 opinion poll by *Asahi Shimbun*.

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12. See, for instance, Bill Emmott, *Japanophobia: The Myth of the Invincible Japan* (New York: Times Books, 1993). *Japan passing* refers to Tokyo's concern of being left out of critical decisions affecting Japanese security.

13. See, for example, "Japan, U.S. Vow to Step Up Defense Ties over North Korean Provocation," *Japan Times*, 16 February 2016, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/02/16-national/japan-u-s-vow-step-defense-ties-north-korean-provocation/#.XNwrTY5KiUm>.

14. Shōgo Imoto, "Usureru Kakubusō no tabū" [The eroding nuclear taboo], *Agora*, 17 February 2016, <http://agora-web.jp/archives/1670228.html>.

15. Sayuri Romei, "Japan's Shift in the Nuclear Debate: A Changing Identity?" (working paper, Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, May 2017). <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/publication/japans-shift-nuclear-debate>.

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17. Pew Research Center, "Global Publics Back U.S. on Fighting ISIS, but Are Critical of Post-9/11 Torture." 23 June 2015, 38, <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/06/Balance-of-Power-Report-FINAL-June-23-2015.pdf>.

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21. Michael J. Green and Katsuhisa Furukawa, "New Ambitions, New Obstacles: Japan and Its Search for an Arms Control Strategy," *Arms Control Today* 30, no. 6 (July/August 2000): 17–24.

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32. Michiru Nishida, interview with the author, 8 February 2018.

33. Kazutoshi Aikawa, deputy chief of mission and former director-general of the Disarmament, Non-Proliferation and Science Department, MOFA at Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA's Annual Security Forum, 2 May 2018.

34. Anthony DiFilippo, *Japanese Nuclear Disarmament Policy and the U.S. Security Umbrella* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

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