



Nuclear basics for the alliance

by Brad Glosserman

Nuclear strategy has become a core concern in the U.S.-Japan alliance. North Korea is the immediate trigger for Japanese anxiety, but similar uncertainties lie just beneath the surface when Japan contemplates China as well. U.S. assurances are needed – both to Japan and to potential adversaries that need to be deterred. Most important, however, is a “back to basics approach” for the U.S. and its alliance partners. Changing international circumstances and evolving domestic politics oblige Washington and its allies to focus on fundamentals of strategy to ensure that alliances have the foundation – the common worldview – that will allow them to survive and thrive in a new strategic environment.

Japan has long nestled under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Throughout the Cold War, America’s extended deterrent provided the foundation of the U.S.-Japan alliance: all potential enemies of Japan wrestled with the knowledge that an attack on Japan would trigger a U.S. response and that a nuclear attack could include a retaliatory attack with nuclear weapons. That prospect was thought sufficient to deter those enemies.

North Korea’s Oct. 9 nuclear test has somehow raised doubts in Japan about the credibility of the U.S. commitment to defend Japan or its ability to credibly deter Pyongyang. Fears of decoupling are behind comments about Japan considering its own nuclear capability or the acquisition of a “strike capability” that would allow Tokyo to pre-emptively attack missiles on a launch pad.

On one level, those questions make no sense. Only a North Korean retaliatory capability – an arsenal that could survive a first strike and respond against the U.S. – would give Washington reason to pause. The Soviet Union had that ability (hence mutually assured destruction, or MAD); North Korea does not. It doesn’t have missiles capable of reaching the U.S. and if Pyongyang decided to strike U.S. assets in Japan, then Washington would have reasons of its own to respond – it would not merely be defending an ally. So, there is no reason to think that the U.S. would not use any and all of its forces in Japan’s defense. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made that point immediately after the North Korean test, when she went to Japan and publicly reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to Japan’s defense.

Nonetheless, some in Japan see the U.S. readiness to move forward in the Six-Party Talks as signaling a loosening of the U.S.-Japan alliance. They argue that the U.S. commitment to the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula – as agreed by all six parties in their Sept. 19, 2005 Joint Statement – is wavering. It isn’t clear what evidence supports this claim; But, U.S. protestations notwithstanding, there is a growing view in Japan that the U.S. will be satisfied

with a nuclear weapons-equipped North Korea as long as its proliferation concerns are addressed. In short, if the U.S. can recover reprocessed plutonium and shut down the North’s current nuclear facilities, Tokyo worries that Washington may decide it can live with 1-2 (or maybe even 6-8) nuclear weapons in North Korea.

Washington’s sudden decision to give in to Pyongyang and return illicit funds frozen in Banco Delta Asia increases fears that it might also decide to press ahead in talks with Pyongyang despite a lack of progress in Japan-North Korea discussions. The possibility of a gap between Tokyo and Washington – created by differing priorities attached to the abductee issue – is seen as eroding our commitment to Japan’s defense.

Skeptics also point to the recent U.S.-India agreement on nuclear cooperation for proof of a less-than-solid U.S. commitment to nuclear nonproliferation. Despite U.S. claims that the agreement is a win-win for the NPT and India (and U.S.-India relations), some in Japan see it as “a glass half empty” when it comes to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and an ominous portent: the U.S. may be equally inclined to close its eyes to a residual North Korean arsenal when the six-party process concludes.

The obvious response is that all parties to the Six-Party Talks agreed that the ultimate goal of those discussions is the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula: that is made clear in the Sept. 19, 2005 Joint Declaration as well as the Feb. 13, 2007 agreement along with other accords, such as the 1992 North-South Declaration.

Some of the concern is driven by personalities. During the first four years of the George W. Bush administration, the State Department and National Security Council featured prominent Japan specialists and supporters in senior-most positions, and the Bush-Koizumi “special friendship” made criticism of Tokyo off-limits. Despite assurances that the U.S. continues to attach a high priority to Japan in its foreign policy – and proof of that in the execution of its policy – many in Tokyo are disconcerted by the new team in Washington and the willingness of senior officials (not to mention Capitol Hill) to publicly admonish current Prime Minister Abe. In private conversations, they express deep concern over Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill’s “optimism” regarding the Six-Party Talks and his apparent eagerness to cut a deal with Pyongyang. This, perhaps more than anything else, colors thinking about U.S. policy.

This kind of insecurity is difficult to combat: it says more about the Japanese psyche than it does about the U.S. commitment to the alliance. It raises another question: how much reassurance is enough? A constant repetition by the U.S.

of its readiness to defend Japan would soon sound like warmongering to others.

There is one important step the U.S. can take in its relations with Japan. The two countries should commence a dialogue on strategic issues – focusing on nuclear questions. While the two countries have high-ranking strategic talks and Pacific Forum hosts a forward-leaning track-two strategic discussion, they have traditionally shied away from tackling nuclear issues, primarily because of political sensitivities. That must end.

A grasp of strategic fundamentals is the bedrock of any alliance and a clear understanding of nuclear issues is integral to the future of the U.S.-Japan alliance. While we usually emphasize the importance of shared national interests, there also needs to be an understanding of each others' logic to create the genuine "meeting of the minds" that allows alliances to endure. It's not enough to know that nuclear weapons play a role in ensuring the security of the two countries: they both have to understand and agree on how that process works. That requires a detailed study of deterrence and how such weapons would be used.

This is not an argument for Tokyo to embrace a nuclear capability; it's just the opposite. A real understanding of strategy and national interests would lead Japanese to continue their nonnuclear policy. Having their own nuclear weapons will not make Japan safer. But that conclusion must be the result of a thoughtful analysis, not an emotional or stunted debate over options, which risks being reversed in a moment of fear.

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