



Japan peers into the abyss by Brad Glosserman

It is an item of faith for many Japanese – and many Japan watchers – that their country will never build or acquire nuclear weapons. Japan's nonnuclear status, a product of both the searing experience of August 1945 and a calculation of the strategic value of nuclear weapons, has been a pillar of the nation's postwar political identity. Recent developments could force Japan to reconsider the nuclear option, however. The U.S. must step up, engage Japanese decision-makers in a serious discussion of their security concerns and work to allay them. Failure to do so could push Tokyo over the nuclear brink.

Japan's status as the only atom-bombed nation made highly charged any discussion of nuclear weapons. An education system dominated by the left used the nation's history to reinforce pacifism and to subtly critique a conservative foreign policy that relied on the U.S. for national security. The result was a virtual "taboo" that headed off any discussion of nuclear weapons and the creation of a third rail of national politics: Japanese politicians who even suggested that it might make sense for Japan to have a nuclear weapons capability were immediately ostracized or punished.

In fact, however, there was a rational and calculated examination of the nuclear option in Japan. In keeping with the sensitivity of the issue, studies were conducted at arms-length – usually academics reporting to government bodies – so that they would not be official assessments. These all concluded that the nuclear option made no sense for Japan: the country had no strategic depth and was therefore vulnerable to a second strike; it would undermine Japan's diplomatic standing as it would repudiate a pillar of the country's postwar diplomacy; acquisition of nuclear weapons would create regional instability and increase suspicions about Japan; and it would damage, if not rupture, the alliance with the U.S., contributing to Japan's political isolation in the region. In short, a very real cost-benefit analysis also contributed to Japan's nonnuclear status.

That calculus may be changing. Recent changes in the regional security environment are pushing Japanese security planners to re-examine the nuclear option. This process is just beginning – it appears to be the start of a debate about having a nuclear debate – but there is no mistaking the unease about developments and their implications for Japan's national security.

One source of concern is the U.S.-India civilian nuclear cooperation agreement. Japanese worry about this deal because it appears to reward bad behavior (India has never ratified the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty), it could set a precedent that would encourage other countries to proliferate, and it appears to downplay the significance of the NPT,

making it just another item in the U.S. diplomatic toolkit, to be discarded when geopolitics dictates, rather than the cornerstone of the global nonproliferation regime.

Security planners in Tokyo worry that Pyongyang is closely watching those negotiations and using them as a benchmark for its own multilateral talks. (Delhi insists its experience is unique and any deal will not set a precedent.) Shifts in U.S. policy – its readiness to talk directly to the North Koreans, to roll back financial sanctions and to move forward with normalization even though Japanese concerns about the fate of its abductees have not been met – harden Japanese fears that the U.S. will make similar compromises when it comes to denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula and Washington may settle for a "gray" nuclear capability in the North, neither confirmed nor denied. While reluctant to say so out loud, Japanese are especially worried that a reunified Korea – even headed by the South – would retain that nuclear capability. If a democratic India can be trusted with nuclear weapons, why not a democratic unified Korea? Japanese are well aware of the animosity that colors its relationship with South Korea and wonder: What would the U.S. do in the event of a conflict between its two Northeast Asian allies?

China is an equally troubling issue. Japan's confidence was sapped by the "lost decade" of the 1990s and China's rise as Japan stagnated. There is a deep-rooted fear that the U.S. will reassess "the most important bilateral relationship in the world, bar none," and seek a great power condominium with Beijing. The close consultation with China in the Six-Party Talks is seen as a harbinger of the future.

Nuclear dynamics contribute to the uncertainty. In the Cold War, the U.S. accepted mutual vulnerability with the Soviet Union to create strategic stability. Both superpowers knew that in a crisis each could inflict unacceptable damage on the other; that provided the foundation for stability through mutual deterrence.

The U.S. and China have not reached a similar arrangement. The U.S. might decide that it won't accept mutual vulnerability with China and would counter Chinese attempts to create such a relationship. That would threaten an arms race and could create regional instability. But if the U.S. accepts vulnerability to Chinese missiles, that China will have the ability to strike the U.S. in a crisis, there will be doubts in Japan about Washington's readiness to trade Los Angeles for Tokyo. Neither outcome is satisfactory for Tokyo.

Collectively, these developments contribute to growing unease in Tokyo about the credibility of the U.S. commitment to defend Japan. And those doubts, rather than any nationalist sentiment or discontent with Japan's international status, will be the drivers of and the most important factors in Japanese national security debates about nuclear weapons.

What options does Japan have? It could decide to build a nuclear weapon, but all the countervailing considerations outlined previously still apply. Going nuclear is not in Japan's national interest. Missile defense is another option, and Japan has deployed Patriot missiles and Aegis-equipped destroyers. But this technology is still relatively young and most governments see it as part of a multilayered defense strategy.

A complement to passive defenses is a conventional offensive strike capability that would allow Tokyo to destroy threats before they reach Japan. Tokyo has shunned the acquisition of such capabilities even though lawmakers conceded five decades ago that they are constitutionally permissible. Defense specialists consider this an increasingly attractive option after the North Korean missile and nuclear tests. Such capabilities would likely be destabilizing and elevate concerns about Japanese intentions, however. The possibility of a preemptive strike could raise a potential adversary's readiness to use its own forces, fearing that it had to "use em or lose em."

A third option is abandoning one of Japan's three nonnuclear principles (which prohibit the production, possession or introduction of nuclear weapons on Japanese soil). It has been suggested that the U.S. station some of its nuclear weapons in Japan, ensuring a stronger coupling of U.S. and Japanese interests. Japanese strategists are beginning to explore this option, although it is politically impossible at this time.

Hardware is a sub-optimal solution. Japan is increasingly insecure, and that insecurity reflects doubts about the U.S. commitment to Japan's defense. A decision to go nuclear would be a clear sign that there is no faith in the U.S.

U.S. policy makers are waking up to the growing uncertainty at the heart of the alliance, but repeated assurances of the U.S. commitment to the alliance – while welcome – aren't enough. The U.S. needs frank and candid discussions with Japanese about the roots of their insecurity, how the nuclear deterrent works, and measures that can be taken to build Japanese confidence. This conversation would demonstrate U.S. seriousness about Japanese concerns and show respect for an ally by sharing information vital to its defense. (Japan would have to take steps to ensure the contents of those conversations are kept secret.)

While possession of nuclear weapons appears unnecessary and unwise given current circumstances, a nuclear debate would still be in Japan's interest. It would help Japanese better understand the reasons for not acquiring such weapons and reconfirm Japan's nonnuclear status. It could help forge a national consensus as anxieties mount. The U.S. must be a partner in this process since its behavior and perceived reliability will be the most important factor in the Japanese debate.

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