



## **Unforeseen Consequences: Japan's Emerging Nuclear Debate** by Ayako Doi

The escalating tension in East Asia brought on by North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship has forced Pacific allies and opponents alike to rethink their circumstances and their options. Differences in approach have led the U.S. and South Korea to reconsider their security roles on the Peninsula. China, just starting to savor its membership in the community of free-market economies, seems at a loss on how to handle its ill-behaved protege. As Kim Jong-il cranks up his bad-boy behavior, people in both Tokyo and Washington are starting to think the unthinkable - that Japan itself could, and maybe should, go nuclear.

The idea popped up when former Defense Secretary William Cohen visited Tokyo in January, and asked Japanese politicians if they would consider doing so if North Korea shows it has the bomb. Then Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain suggested during a hearing last month that the U.S. should consider arming Japan with nuclear weapons - and telling the Chinese it intends to do so, as a way to force Beijing to reign in Pyongyang. Cato Institute analyst Ted Carpenter has advocated similar ideas for some time.

All that has received scant attention from U.S. media preoccupied with the impending war in Iraq, but it has generated lots of interest among Japanese reporters and policy advocates. Nihon Keizai dismissed the ideas of McCain and Carpenter as totally unrealistic, and said it was dismayed by their motives. By contrast, the latest issue of *Shokun*, an opinion monthly of the conservative Bungei Shunju publishing house, carries an essay by policy consultant Ito Kan, arguing that indeed, it's high time for Japan to have its own nuclear deterrent.

Picking back through the historical record of comments by Henry Kissinger and former CIA director Stansfield Turner, and of interviews with lesser ex-State Department and CIA officials, Ito concludes that the "nuclear umbrella" is pie in the sky. If Japan got nuked by China, say, or Russia, the U.S. would not retaliate, he argues, because that would risk a nuclear strike on its own cities. Now that North Korea seems to have a missile capable of reaching the West Coast, the same will be true if Pyongyang lobbed a nuclear Taepodong into Japan, he surmises.

The Japanese have a moral duty to defend their own country, Ito argues, and to fulfill it, Tokyo should consider quitting the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and acquiring the minimum number of nukes - say, 200 or 300 warheads on sea-based cruise missiles - necessary to create its own nuclear umbrella. Ito bounced his idea off 10 U.S. policy thinkers, and

three of them - Cato's Carpenter, former Carter aide Zbigniew Brzezinski, and an unnamed Navy engineer - agreed. CSIS Japan chair William Breer, CRS analyst Larry Niksch, and two unnamed CIA officers reserved judgment, on grounds it's not clear how either public would react. Former Pentagon Japan desk

There is another reason for U.S. advocacy of a nuclear Japan, argues UCLA Japan scholar Ron Morse: letting Japan go nuclear might well be a way to stop a resurgenc

chiefs Jim Auer and Paul Giarra and National War College researcher Jim Przystup were adamantly opposed, on grounds the U.S. umbrella works. Ito said that's understandable, considering each of them advocated that as an official. e of ultra-nationalism. Especially at a time of economic difficulty, says Morse, any U.S. effort to block Japan from building its own deterrent would be grist for the mills of anti-Americanists like Tokyo Gov. Ishihara Shintaro or manga artist Kobayashi Yoshinori. "We want sensible people to be in power, not rightwing fanatics." Besides, if modern Japan is what the Japanese, and their U.S. protectors, say it is - a peace-loving democracy under firm civilian control - why should anyone worry about a nuclear Japan? "The more good guys - have nuclear weapons, the better," he says.

The problem with all these arguments is that most Japanese and most of the current political establishment, have no desire to go nuclear. The Japanese in general still suffer from the "nuclear allergy" they acquired in 1945, and so do a lot of the country's defense thinkers. Asahi recently unearthed a confidential 1995 study in which the Defense Agency concluded that acquiring nuclear weapons would do more harm than good to Japan's security environment (*Japan Digest*, 2/20). But wars can change things. Just as Japan would never have started sending troops around the world on peacekeeping missions had it not been for the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, the twin crises with Iraq and North Korea may bring unforeseen consequences.

*Ayako Doi is editor of Japan Digest. This comment originally appeared in Japan Digest March 12.*