

Japan's Moment to Shine By Sheila Smith

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Leaders from 46 countries arrive this weekend in Washington for President Obama's initiative on nuclear security. Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio, as Japan's representative, will have ample opportunity in this unique setting to give voice to Japan's long-held aspirations for a nuclear free world. But he can also do what no previous Japanese prime minister could – he can work with President Obama on a shared action plan for nonproliferation and disarmament.

In the U.S., President Obama has set the stage for a serious conversation on how to reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons, an argument that has captured the imagination of our greatest strategic thinkers as well as our military planners. Realists across the political spectrum, including Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William Perry, and George Schultz, have articulated the need to rethink our reliance on these weapons of mass destruction. And in the recently released Department of Defense Nuclear Posture Review, our government has identified for the first time the limits it will place on the use of these weapons in our arsenal.

Japan has two roles to play in the conversation that is about to unfold. The first, of course, is its well-known role as advocate for the abolishment of these weapons. As the only society to have suffered from the use of nuclear weapons, Japan occupies a singular place in this global debate. Postwar Japan has been an ardent advocate of nuclear disarmament and the activism of Hiroshima and Nagasaki cities to memorialize the suffering of their citizens in 1945 has ensured that the inhumanity of the use of these brutal weapons has been imprinted deeply on generations of global citizens.

But even Japan has been forced to rely for its security on the maintenance of these weapons. As an ally of the United States during the Cold War, the logic of extended deterrence provided by the US strategic arsenal made the unthinkable possible: even those who suffered most from their use relied on their destructive power to deter aggression.

For anyone who has visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the term nuclear security seems an oxymoron, but it is indeed exactly this dilemma that the 46 world leaders will need to confront when they meet in Washington, DC.

Japan and the US together present a formidable force for energizing the debate over how to control access to

nuclear materials for those who would aspire to build these weapons. Japan has for decades been the world's second wealthiest nation, yet has eschewed the weaponry that many would suggest has become the currency of great power status. Japan has chosen instead a strategic bargain that embraces dependence on another sovereign power. Today, the challenge for Washington's defense planners, as we can see from the Nuclear Posture Review, is how to assure our allies that we will still be able to defend them against nuclear threats while reducing our reliance on their use.

In the arena of nonproliferation, Japan has been an active participant in building the global regime comprised of those who voluntarily eschew nuclear weapons. After much internal debate, Tokyo submitted its own nuclear facilities to IAEA inspection in the mid-1970s, and has worked closely with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in developing robust inspection and notification procedures. Today, the head of the IAEA is an internationally renowned disarmament expert from Japan, Amano Yukiya.

But the ability of the NPT to police those who want to hide their capabilities remains weak, and this creates new challenges for both Japan and the U.S. in confronting those who proliferate. When North Korea more than a decade ago taunted the IAEA by refusing inspections, Japan joined the US and South Korea in providing economic assistance to provide energy to the impoverished state. More recently, when Pyongyang conducted nuclear tests and threatened Japan and other neighbors with missile launches, the UN Security Council finally mobilized a unanimous effort to confront proliferation and impose sanctions on the recalcitrant regime. In its capacity as chair of the UNSC, Japan actively led deliberations on UN Resolution 1874 on North Korea. In 2010, Japan will need to be equally decisive in actively leading the UN effort to confront Iran over the violations chronicled in the IAEA's recent report on Iran's violations of its obligations under the NPT.

Today, the United States must balance its twin commitments to nonproliferation and to nuclear deterrence. Our allies play a critical role in helping Washington find a path forward. As the Obama administration begins to articulate a policy that will limit its nuclear arsenal (as well as constrain its use of these weapons in wartime), Japan and other allies will need to consider carefully their own role in the broader effort to end the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

The US and its allies must develop together a strategy for security assurances that takes into consideration

regional security balances. A shared understanding of the allied defense needs and capabilities will be a key element in the development of a joint allied strategy for nonproliferation. It is not enough to simply decry the existence of nuclear weapons. The challenge for this and perhaps the next generation of US and Japanese leaders will be to work closely on crafting a joint approach to regional security that both reassures Japanese citizens of their safety and embraces a concrete action plan for working with others in Northeast Asia to reduce our collective reliance on nuclear forces.

This is the moment for Japan to marshal its considerable diplomatic and scientific expertise to the emerging effort to confront nuclear proliferation.

But Japan must start by acknowledging the fundamental role nuclear weapons have played in Japan's own security planning, and then work with Washington to map out the specifics of a process by which Japan's citizens remain convinced of their security in a world that continues to offer incentives to those who would benefit from the acquisition of nuclear technology.

I hope that when Prime Minister Hatoyama sits down to dinner with President Obama and other leaders Monday evening he will take full advantage of the moment to demonstrate Japan's commitment to the ultimate aim of ending our reliance on these weapons.

This is Japan's moment to shine – to bring its message to a more receptive global audience and to join hands with a leadership in Washington that shares the desire to turn aspiration into practical steps forward in developing new strategic approaches that reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons.