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A Better Umbrella for Japan
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While media attention has been caught up in the rift between US President Barack Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama on display at last month's Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, deeper security concerns lurk beneath Obama's attempts to build a "nuclear free world." Official rhetoric aside, some circles in Japan are ambivalent about the American leader's goals as he moves forward on fundamental changes to the international nuclear order.

At issue is Japan's conflicting position toward nuclear weapons, as a nation that both opposes nuclear weapons in principle yet depends on the U.S. nuclear umbrella in reality. In truth, the Obama administration's new nuclear policy, particularly as outlined by its recent Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), provides a framework that will move the international community closer to Japan's ideal of a denuclearized world, while better providing for the nation's security needs.

Many Japanese welcome the opportunity to abolish "the bomb," seeing it as a continuation of their anti-nuclear campaigns rooted in the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. According to a recent opinion poll, some 96 percent of Japanese support Obama's call for a nuclear-free world.

Officially, Japanese governments have made nonproliferation and denuclearization a core pillar of Japanese foreign policy since the end of World War II.

Yet beyond the "tatemae," or face, of opposition to nuclear arms, the "honne," true intention, has been radically different. For decades, successive Japanese administrations have sought to ensure the viability and credibility of the US nuclear umbrella, as recently declassified Japanese diplomatic documents have demonstrated.

Today, many Japanese security policy experts and officials fear that Obama may be embarking on a naive and quixotic quest that will leave the Japanese archipelago vulnerable to Chinese and North Korean nuclear blackmail and attack, or at least weaken Tokyo's diplomatic leverage in dealing with these nuclear-armed states.

Japanese concerns are understandable given the rapid pace of Chinese military modernization and North Korea's ongoing nuclear brinkmanship, which have only been met domestically by a continuing decline (under LDP administrations) of the Japanese defense budget. Given its neighborhood, and its desire to minimize military expenditures, Japan has every reason to seek a solid US commitment to maintain a robust and credible extended deterrent.

The new NPR provides that commitment to Japan, as well as other allies, while at the same time taking steps toward dismantling the Cold War-era global nuclear system. Measures such as reducing the number of warheads in the US and Russian nuclear arsenals under the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and taking further steps to limit proliferation will make Japan – and the world – safer from the possibility of nuclear-armed conflict.

Another core goal of the NPR is to shift the nature of deterrence from nuclear weapons toward greater reliance on conventional capabilities to deter against strategic threats. This will be a long-term process, but recent technological advancements already make the nuclear option under all but the most extreme scenarios somewhat obsolete.

The basic framework of the US nuclear umbrella is to deter Japan's potential enemies by the menacing potential of US retaliation, which could range from a massive nuclear strike aimed at completely destroying the enemy to a more restrictive ("tactical") use of nuclear weapons to wipe out invading forces or other military assets. Additionally, nuclear systems could be used to target WMD-manufacturing facilities.

Yet, in practice, the credibility of the nuclear umbrella is limited. First, there is the enormous ethical question of using nuclear weapons. Except in cases where millions of Americans or Japanese are killed, it is now very difficult to imagine scenarios where a US president – whether a "hawk" or a "dove" – would press the nuclear button. Second, despite the vast theoretical literature on the subject, no one knows how such a conflict would escalate. Could it be limited? Or would it automatically lead to Armageddon? Understandably, no one is eager to find out. Third, due to the enormous progress in precision-guided weaponry, there are now non-nuclear alternatives that have the advantage of accurately targeting and eliminating key assets during a conflict. In light of the above concerns, conventional weaponry can present even more of a credible deterrent under most conflict scenarios.

During the Cold War, it was logical for Japanese governments to do their utmost to keep the country under the protection of the US nuclear umbrella. But, today, the focus of Japanese strategic thinking about the US role in defending Japan should move to optimizing the non-nuclear component of the US arsenal. Such a shift could also present opportunities for Japan to expand its own role in a non-nuclear deterrence strategy as well as in shouldering more of its homeland defense burdens – the latter being a professed goal of the current leadership in Tokyo.

Were the United States to remain wedded entirely to a nuclear-based umbrella, the credibility of US extended deterrence would dangerously decline, leaving Japan with the unpalatable choice of greater vulnerability to threats and/or a massive increase in defense expenditures. The NPR addresses Japan's evolving security concerns by stressing both the conventional and nuclear dimensions of US extended deterrence while paving the way toward a post-nuclear world.

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