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Nuke or No Nuke? Japan's Long Dilemma

The discreet temptation for a national nuclear deterrent has persisted for decades.

By Yo-Jung Chen
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U.S. Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has committed an utter geopolitical gaffe by suggesting that Japan and South Korea should be allowed to become nuclear-armed, thus forcing the spotlight on a topic that Japan had hoped nobody would notice.

No one in the world can rival Japan when it comes to recounting the horror of nuclear war and to promoting a world free of such weapons.

Indeed, every year on August 6, the entire nation comes to a halt to commemorate victims of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. From politicians to survivors, passionate calls are sent out to the world to “never repeat this tragedy again” and the nation’s leader renews the vow to work towards the abolition of nuclear weapons in the world.

In recent years, Japan has resorted to soliciting world leaders, especially the nuclear powers, to come visit the destruction. In this sense, U.S. President Barack Obama’s historical visit to Hiroshima in June scored a highly symbolic success for Japan since it was the first time that the leader of the very country that dropped the bomb has set foot on the ground devastated by that decision.

All these anti-nuclear manifestations are more than natural and expected on the part of the only country in the world to have suffered a nuclear attack.

With this background in mind, it is only natural to believe that becoming a military nuclear power would be the last thing Japan has in mind. In fact, the “nuclear allergy” remains strong among the Japanese people. Seventy years after Hiroshima, this allergy seems to grow even stronger following the no less horrible March 2011 meltdown of three nuclear power reactors in Fukushima. Not only does this particular public sentiment practically forestall open discussions about possessing nukes, but it also fuels a strong opposition to civil nuclear power following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster.

Considering this particular public sentiment in Japan, it is astonishing to see this same population elect, election after election, leaders that are known to be more or less interested in the development of an autonomous nuclear deterrent.

Since the end of World War II, Japan has put itself under the nuclear umbrella of the United States. This is understandable given its geopolitical situation at the end of the war: facing the hostile Communist bloc of Soviet Union, China and North Korea, and considering that post-war Japan was prohibited by its Constitution from building a full-fledged army of its own.

This nuclear umbrella, offered by the very country that dropped the bombs on Japan, may seem a contradiction to Japanese people’s natural aversion to anything nuclear. It also conflicts with Japan’s self-imposed “Three Non-Nuclear Principles” (no possession, no fabrication, no admission to Japan’s territory). The principle of “no admission” in particular is practically impossible to implement since it is an open secret that U.S. forces stationed in Japan do bring nuclear weapons into the country. Tokyo, however, justified this contradiction by maintaining over the decades that, as long as the U.S. does not mention them, such nuclear weapons should be considered as non-existent on Japanese soil.

Despite the strong popular aversion against nukes, successive Japanese prime ministers have more or less discreetly contemplated or discussed the remote possibility of Japan developing and possessing its own nuclear weapons. They nevertheless knew very well that the United States and other nuclear powers sitting at the UN Security Council would never allow Japan to breach the Non-Proliferation Treaty and become a new nuclear power.

The discreet temptation for a national nuclear deterrent has persisted for decades and saw a spark in 1964 when China successfully carried out its first nuclear test. This “China shock,” among others, pushed Japan to conduct a secret and short-lived discussion with West Germany on the possibility for the two former Axis nations developing their own nuclear deterrent capability in 1969.

Unfortunately for the advocates of nuclear armament in Japan, if there is a consistent bipartisan policy in the United States since the end of World War II, it is the determination to not allow Japan to become a nuclear power. According to research by Kan Ito (a U.S.-resident Japanese journalist), during his historic visit to China in 1972, U.S. President Richard Nixon secretly assured the Chinese that Japan would never be allowed to develop its own nuclear deterrent. In

fact, even though China is the main target of the U.S.-Japan alliance, Beijing, ironically, does grant a positive appreciation and expectation on this very alliance for its role in keeping Japan away from developing its own nuclear arms.

Today, as the saber-rattling and nuclear-armed North Korea presents an even greater and imminent nuclear threat than China and Russia, and as doubts grow over the effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear umbrella, the sense of urgency for an autonomous nuclear deterrent grows even stronger among those in power in Tokyo. Public sentiment and U.S. opposition still make it a taboo to discuss openly, but the temptation is in the air and the picture becomes clear when the dots on the recent political map of Japan are connected.

First, in June this year, during Obama's historic visit to Hiroshima, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe proudly stood by Obama and solemnly renewed his vow of working towards realizing a world without nuclear weapons. However, less than two months later, in a cabinet reshuffle, the same prime minister appointed Tomomi Inada, a hawkish nationalist and staunch advocate of nuclear armament, to the sensitive post of Minister of Defense. Obviously, this appointment calls into question the sincerity of the vow Abe made in Hiroshima, although Abe himself is also known to have stated, before becoming prime minister, that the possession of a "minimum necessary" nuclear arsenal was constitutionally possible.

This year the Abe administration also formalized his previous statement (noted above) that leaves the nuclear option open by making official its interpretation of the pacifist Constitution with regard to nuclear armament. According to this [now formal position](#), although it is politically not envisioned to go nuclear for the moment, "Even if it involves nuclear weapons, the Constitution does not necessarily ban the possession of them as long as they are restricted," to fit within the limit of "minimum necessity" applied to self-defense capabilities.

Moreover, Japan is known to have accumulated an impressive stockpile of 48 tons of plutonium from recycling the spent fuel of its nuclear power plants. According to World Information Service on Energy, 10.8 tons of it are stored in the country (the rest are in Britain and France, where the spent fuel is reprocessed). This unusually large stock of plutonium makes it theoretically possible for technically advanced Japan to start producing thousands of nuclear warheads in a matter of months.

Japan's recent decision to maintain the costly program of developing a full nuclear fuel cycle despite repeated technical failures and delays may result in producing still more weapon-grade plutonium to the growing alarm of Japan's neighbors, starting with China. Even Washington has started to worry about this massive stockpile of plutonium.

Indeed, as some observers note, since Japan could technically achieve nuclear armament in a short time span, the very existence of this huge stockpile of weapon-grade plutonium constitutes in itself a de facto nuclear deterrent.

To be realistic, the prospect of a nuclear-armed Japan is far-fetched in the short-term given the lack of political support at home as well as realpolitik considerations. Besides, if Tokyo decides

to go nuclear, Japan would first have to quit the Non-Proliferation Treaty and make itself an isolated rogue state in the international community, going down the same path as North Korea.

A nuclear-armed Japan would create a huge geopolitical tsunami in the already volatile East Asia region, pushing an impatient South Korea to follow suit, driving China to further reinforce its nuclear arsenal, vindicating North Korea in its development of nuclear military might, and launching the whole region into an uncontrollable arms race.

Short of the rise of a Putin-like autocratic leader, no Japanese politician in the foreseeable future can be expected to run such risk.

This being said, defense hawks in Japan could take comfort in the fact that, thanks to the growing sense of threat posed by an aggressively assertive China and North Korea in recent years, the normally docile and peace-loving Japanese population is gradually evolving towards accepting a more robust defense capability. From there to scaring them into further accepting a national nuclear deterrent, there are only a few steps to take.

There is also a mounting concern in Washington that the seemingly unstoppable North Korean nuclear menace will eventually push Japan and South Korea into developing their own nuclear deterrent. To address this concern, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry deemed it necessary to hold a joint meeting with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts at the sidelines of this year's UN General Assembly to reaffirm the guarantee of America's nuclear umbrella.

In fact, the fear of a nuclear-armed Japan looms so large in Japan's neighborhood that the United States has exploited it in the recent effort to persuade China to restrain North Korea from further nuclear adventures. The Americans practically told the Chinese in substance: "If you don't stop the North Koreans, we won't be able to stop the Japanese from going nuclear!"

Precisely, this fear may well be the ultimate unspoken aim of Japan's nuclear policy: Maintain a massive stockpile of high-grade plutonium for a future-generation civil nuclear power purpose while, at the same time, using this stock as an effective de facto nuclear deterrent without having to engage in the controversial and polemical development of actual nuclear arms.