



**Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive**  
**DSpace Repository**

---

Faculty and Researchers

Faculty and Researchers Collection

---

2009-04-01

**The Future of Japanese Nuclear Policy;  
Strategic Insights, v. 8, issue 2 (April 2009)**

Rublee, Maria Rost

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

---

Strategic Insights, v.8, issue 2 (April 2009)

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/11379>

*Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun*



Calhoun is a project of the Dudley Knox Library at NPS, furthering the precepts and goals of open government and government transparency. All information contained herein has been approved for release by the NPS Public Affairs Officer.

**Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School**  
**411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle**  
**Monterey, California USA 93943**

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

## The Future of Japanese Nuclear Policy

by [Maria Rost Rublee, Ph.D.](#)

[Strategic Insights](#) is a quarterly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

### Introduction

For many decades, Washington has been concerned about the possibility of a Japanese nuclear option. The NPT was formed in part to keep Japan from going nuclear. Henry Kissinger predicted the United States would not be able to prevent Japan from acquiring its own nuclear weapons. After the North Korean nuclear test of October 2006, concern was expressed globally about a potential Japanese nuclear response. For decades, however, Japan has instead exercised nuclear forbearance, preferring to rely on U.S. extended deterrence and global disarmament diplomacy. For how much longer can we expect this policy pattern to continue? To analyze this question, this article examines the factors most likely to keep Japan on its current non-nuclear path, as well as those with the potential of spurring Japan to take the nuclear option. To begin, however, the paper provides insight into past Japanese nuclear decision-making by exploring the four time periods in which the country seriously considered its own military nuclear capability.

### Japan Nuclear Decision-Making

Japanese elite seriously considered a military nuclear capability four times since the end of World War II: in the mid-1960s (due to the 1964 Chinese nuclear test), the mid-1970s (when Japan debated whether to ratify the NPT), the mid-1990s (when Japan debated the question of NPT's indefinite extension), and the current time frame (due to the North Korean nuclear crisis).

#### *Mid-1960s*

After the 1964 Chinese nuclear test, the Japanese government ordered a secret study to assess the costs and benefits of a Japanese nuclear weapons program.<sup>[1]</sup> Two reports were issued: a technical and economic feasibility study, in 1968, and a political analysis, in 1970. The reports concluded that “technically, there were no impediments but politically it would not be wise.”<sup>[2]</sup> Of particular interest is the second report, which weighed the political and strategic costs and benefits of an independent nuclear option, and which concluded that it was not the best path for Japan. In terms of benefits, an indigenous nuclear program would allow Japan to forgo dependence on the United States, which had defeated Japan militarily (through the use of atomic weapons, no less) less than two decades before. Japan would not have to rely on U.S. extended deterrence, the credibility of which was questioned by some Japanese elites. The country could also avoid *makikomare ron*, entanglement in American conflicts. In addition, Japan would regain national pride by joining the nuclear “club.” In terms of costs, a nuclear weapons program would strain the relationship with the United States, divert resources from economic growth, and lead to deterioration of the security environment in the region, as well as likely diplomatic isolation. “The authors felt, in conclusion, that Japan’s security would best be attained through a multi-

dimensional approach including political and economic efforts, and not through a traditional militaristic, power-based approach.”[3] Finally, the ruling party (the Liberal Democratic Party) likely realized the steep political costs that a nuclear option would impose, given the strong anti-nuclear sentiment among the Japanese public.[4]

### *Mid-1970s*

In contrast to the nuclear soul-searching of the 1960s, which was brought on by fear of a nuclear aggressor (China), the nuclear debate of the 1970s was prompted by negotiations on the NPT. While the NPT was opened for signature in 1968 and entered into force in 1970, Japan did not sign it until 1970, and took until 1976 to ratify it. These delays created suspicions in the international community about Japan’s nuclear intentions. If Japan were committed to its three non-nuclear principles (Prime Minister’s Sato 1967 pledge that Japan “will not manufacture or possess nuclear weapons or allow their introduction into this country” [5]), it was argued, why would its leaders stall in embracing the international norm against nuclear nonproliferation? The answer lies in the difficulty Japanese politicians had in creating a consensus for ratification in a divided society. Eventually, reassurances on the non-negotiable nature of the three non-nuclear principles convinced the left to support NPT ratification; security guarantees and settlement of nuclear energy concerns convinced the right wing of the LDP. What convinced the centrist elements of the government, both the bureaucracy and the bulk of the LDP? For the most part, politicians and policy makers believed that refusing to ratify the NPT was unthinkable due to the rift it would cause with the United States. Japan’s defense was secured through the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, and the United States was by far Japan’s closest ally. MOFA “repeatedly emphasized the importance of Japan’s ratification of the NPT as a means for further increasing the U.S.’s trust of Japan: as Japan’s ratification of the NPT touched upon the fundamental issue of the level of mutual trust between the U.S. and Japan, it was felt that any further hesitation in ratifying the NPT without a clear justification would damage the friendly U.S.-Japan bilateral relationship.”[6] Officially, the Japanese government issued a statement declaring that by joining the NPT, Japan would further reinforce its role as a “Peace Nation” and its support of “Peace Diplomacy,” and would increase international trust in Japan.[7] Once ratification took place, the nuclear issue was considered settled. More than one Japanese defense expert agreed that with the ratification of the NPT, Japan’s debate about nuclear weapons never approached the same intensity of pre-NPT, simply because the Japanese had made a commitment and they saw it as unlikely that they would break it.

### *Mid-1990s*

Japan’s nuclear deliberations in the mid-1990s were spurred by two events: the North Korean attempted withdrawal from the NPT in March 1993, and the push for an indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995. In other words, Japan’s closest neighbor revealed it was working on a nuclear weapons program, and the international community was asking Japan to forswear nuclear weapons indefinitely. It should come as no surprise that Japan reassessed its nuclear status. The reluctance to support indefinite extension came from two main sources. First, both the left and center were concerned that indefinite extension would mean that Article 6 of the NPT, which called for the nuclear weapons states to work toward nuclear disarmament, would become obsolete.[8] Second, a small but influential minority in the right wing of the LDP opposed the indefinite extension because they wanted to preserve a nuclear option.[9] The issue was abruptly resolved in September 1993, when a newly elected government declared its support for making the NPT permanent.[10]

The Japanese change of heart likely came about for a number of reasons. Negative domestic and international reaction to Japan’s opposition to indefinite extension was stronger and more pronounced than expected. U.S. pressure influenced the decision, especially given the lead role the United States was playing in diffusing the North Korea nuclear crisis. Finally, the North Korean crisis was being managed, with negotiations and diplomatic efforts involving the United

States, South Korea, the IAEA, and the United Nations. However, while publicly the Japanese had settled the issue, internally questions lingered. Although not revealed until 1999, in 1995 the Japan Defense Agency conducted an interview review of a potential Japanese nuclear weapons program, benignly entitled “A Report Concerning the Problems of the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction.”<sup>[11]</sup> According to JDA sources, “the 31-page internal document was drawn up by three members of the Defense Agency internal bureaus, the Joint Staff Council and the National Institute for Defense Studies under the instruction of then vice minister of defense, Shigeru Hatakeyama.”<sup>[12]</sup> While the text of the report has not been released, it apparently contained a plan for a potential nuclear weapons program, for a JDA spokesman told reporters “the plan was scrapped due to fears it would violate the Nonproliferation Treaty, undermine the U.S. military presence in the region, and cause a backlash from Asian nations.”<sup>[13]</sup> Japanese efforts to develop nuclear weapons would signal a loss of trust in the United States, which would hurt the diplomatic and political relationship, as well as potentially undermine the credibility of U.S. security guarantees. With a majority of states agreeing by consensus to indefinitely extend the NPT at the 1995 NPT Review Conference, they feared a Japanese decision to violate the treaty would both weaken the nonproliferation regime and cause a severe backlash over Japanese hypocrisy. A senior Japanese expert in nuclear issues noted that JDA knew a nuclear weapons program “would deal a serious blow to the international nuclear nonproliferation regime, and that was a part of their reasoning to say no.”<sup>[14]</sup>

### **Current Period**

Japan’s latest round of nuclear introspection began in October 2002, when the U.S. government accused Pyongyang of a secret uranium enrichment program. Considering tensions with North Korea were already high, due to the DPRK’s confirmation just a month earlier that they had abducted Japanese citizens, both the Japanese government and citizenry felt cheated and disillusioned. North Korea’s continued confrontational behavior—such as attempting to “ban” Japan from the talks to resolve the nuclear crisis and then declaring that Japan should be dealt with “with arms, not words”—only further hardened the populace against their neighbor.<sup>[15]</sup> The concern escalated after the North Korean nuclear test in October 2006. In response, fears of a Japanese nuclear response spiked—especially when high-level LDP officials openly called for discussion of an indigenous nuclear option.<sup>[16]</sup> While Prime Minister Shinzo Abe responded to these calls by declaring Japan’s commitment to the three non-nuclear principles, he refused to dismiss the officials and also argued that in a democracy, he could not quash debate on the matter.<sup>[17]</sup> In addition, the Japanese government conducted a secret study about the possibility of going nuclear; the report was leaked to the press in late December. Titled “On the Possibility of Developing Nuclear Weapons Domestically,” the report examined the technical feasibility of producing tactical nuclear weapons. Because of the multitude of technical problems, it was estimated it would take at least three years and between 20-30 billion yen to create a small stockpile of tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>[18]</sup>

In the short term, however, Tokyo seems quite unlikely to respond to the North Korean provocations with a nuclear capability of its own. LDP officials, after all, were not calling for a Japanese nuclear weapons program—only to open discussion about the possibility. The public remains strongly anti-nuclear; a *Yomiuri Shimbun* poll conducted a month after the North Korea nuclear tests revealed that 80 percent of the populace supported upholding the three non-nuclear principles, while only 18 percent believed they should be revised.<sup>[19]</sup> Japanese defense and nuclear experts expressed surprise at the lack of serious discussion about a nuclear option; one noted, “It surprised me how calm the Japanese public was after the NK test. I heard few people saying Japan should go nuclear. The media were saying, ‘Japan should not go nuclear in response.’ Even the conservative papers did not argue Japan should go nuclear.”<sup>[20]</sup> Others noted that the country remained much more focused on abduction issues.<sup>[21]</sup>

Nonetheless, the North Korea nuclear test has provoked a number of more subtle changes in Japanese attitudes. First, the public is much more accepting of discussion of a nuclear option,

and government officials are more willing to engage in such discussion. Previously, any discussion of a military nuclear capability was taboo; officials who raised the issue either were dismissed or had to retract their statements. While opposition leaders demanded the same after the LDP officials raised the possibility of a nuclear Japan, public response was minimal and the officials were not dismissed. The difference in public reaction was noted by the opposition: "Ozawa pointed out that former DPJ lawmaker Shingo Nishimura resigned as a parliamentary vice minister in 1999 after saying in a magazine interview that Japan should debate whether to possess nuclear weapons. 'Even the parliamentary vice minister resigned,' Ozawa said. 'That is how serious (this issue) is.'"<sup>[22]</sup> Defense officials argued privately that discussion of a nuclear option should be allowed to show that it is not a good choice for Japan. "As long as we adhere to the three non-nuclear principles, why can't we talk about it?"<sup>[23]</sup> The second change prompted by the North Korean nuclear tests is the number of analysts arguing that Japan should consider hosting U.S. nuclear weapons on Japanese soil, to enhance the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence.<sup>[24]</sup> This would require revision of the third non-nuclear principle—allowing the introduction of nuclear weapons into Japan—but experts argued this would be preferable and more practical than Japan developing its own nuclear capability. Such a change is extremely unlikely, but the fact that people are talking about it is notable. These two changes do mark an openness to military nuclear capacity, but the fact that North Korea's nuclear tests produced only these changes—and not a Japanese commitment to its own nuclear deterrent—shows that Japan is not likely to develop nuclear weapons any time soon.

## Determinants of Japanese Nuclear Policy

If Japan is unlikely to develop nuclear weapons in the short term, what about in the long term? An over-the-horizon view can help us pinpoint the factors most likely to instigate changes in Japanese nuclear weapons policy. Because of the strength of most domestic factors in keeping Japan non-nuclear, international factors will be the most likely cause should Japan decide to reverse its decades-long policy of nuclear forbearance.

### *Domestic Determinants*

Most domestic inputs act to keep Japan non-nuclear (although not all). Thus, reversal in some of these inputs could influence a reconsideration of the nuclear option.

**Nuclear Allergy.** The Japanese "nuclear allergy"—the widely used term to describe the Japanese aversion to nuclear weapons—is weakening but still has the potential to be a powerful political force. The allergy is strongest among older populations, who have more of a connection with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, even after the North Korean nuclear test, few Japanese wanted to see the country acquire its own nuclear option. This is in part due to what one Japanese defense expert called "reproduced memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki." Cartoons, comic books, movies, radio programs, and television shows have exposed generations of Japanese to the atomic devastation Japan experienced.<sup>[25]</sup> Peace education is a mandatory component in schools, and even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spends money on anti-nuclear education programs.<sup>[26]</sup> As a result, the Japanese dread of nuclear weapons is deep-seated and long lasting. One prominent defense official, who received training in the United States and other Western countries, noted, "As a graduate student in the U.S., I felt very uneasy when I tried to discuss topics like nuclear strategy objectively, leaving those moral judgments aside. I somehow do not like nuclear weapons. More instinctively, I hate them."<sup>[27]</sup>

The political potency of the nuclear allergy comes into play because due to it, politicians are extremely reluctant to raise the possibility of a Japanese nuclear option. Defense experts agree that nuclear weapons are the political "third rail" in Japanese politics, a topic to be handled carefully and best avoided if at all possible. A former ambassador noted, "No politician dares to take this up! Anti-nuclear sentiment is SO strong. Some may think it in their heart but would never

express it.”[28] Even those who believe the nuclear allergy has weakened significantly still admit that the threat of negative public response keeps politicians from raising the nuclear issue. “Pacifist public opinion is not organized, just very vague, just atmosphere,” one senior Japanese defense expert said. “But, if politicians are regarded by the general public as hawkish on nuclear weapons, they could lose their seat.”[29]

To what extent could we expect the importance of this factor to fade? Over time, the nuclear allergy is likely to become less prominent. In March 2007, a range of defense experts interviewed in Tokyo agreed that the younger generation shows less hesitation about Japan exerting military power and shows less aversion to nuclear weapons than older cohorts. Because of the transmission of experiences from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this will likely take place more slowly than might be expected—but will still occur.

**Peace Groups and the Media.** The potency of the nuclear allergy is reinforced by a new breed of peace groups and their connections with the media. A number of small groups have organized to stress the rationality and logic of Japanese nuclear forbearance (in contrast to more traditional anti-nuclear groups, which base arguments on emotional appeals). For example, Peace Depot, a small NGO based outside of Tokyo, documented official Japanese pledges made during the 2000 NPT review conference. Then, they published explicit reviews of Japanese government actions, measuring actions taken versus actions promised. They use this to lobby the Japanese government, and also widely disseminate the materials to the media and peace groups, in hopes that other domestic NGOs will use the information as well. Within five years, moderate and progressive newspapers have done over a hundred articles on Peace Depot, illustrating how the group’s influence is magnified through media attention.[30] Both the government and conservative defense experts have noted the effectiveness of such groups. A Japanese ambassador noted that such groups do constrain the government’s ability to assess a full range of defense options, including nuclear.[31] A conservative defense expert argued that these groups have the power to focus public attention, and thus can sway the opinion of members of the general public.[32]

To what extent could we expect the importance of this factor to fade? In the short term, these groups will likely maintain or strengthen their influence as their effectiveness buoys supporters. However, as the nuclear allergy slowly fades, some support may be lost. Because the groups base their arguments on rationality and logic—for example, a Japanese nuclear weapons program will seriously erode regional relationships—they may be somewhat insulated from a weakening of the nuclear allergy.

**Nuclear Power Industry.** Approximately 30 percent of Japan’s energy comes from nuclear power; Japan has almost no indigenous sources of energy. Thus, nuclear power is critical to both the Japanese economy and security, and the nuclear power industry is taken seriously by Japanese politicians. The nuclear power leadership is quite concerned about any movements toward a Japanese nuclear option, and fears that politicians talking about the nuclear option could seriously hurt their industry. Japan’s nuclear industry is dependent on international fuel supplies, and some have raised the question as to whether the international community would want to supply uranium to a nuclear-armed Japan. A senior LDP member, Koichi Kato, criticized LDP policy chief Shoichi Nakagawa after he publicly called for open discussion on a Japanese military nuclear capability. Kato said,

Japan has the technology to make nuclear weapons. But if, in the future, serious discussion takes place on acquiring nuclear weapons, it will affect our nuclear power industry, upon which we rely for much of our energy. Japan has to import uranium for its nuclear power plants, and discussions about acquiring nuclear weapons will impact international debate on whether it’s wise to supply Japan with uranium.[33]

Defense experts agree that the nuclear power industry is a force for nonproliferation in Japan. One senior expert argued, “The most sensitive sector involves those people involved in peaceful use of nuclear capability—the Atomic Energy Commission. They are afraid their program will be seriously jeopardized by any politicians talking about nuclear capability. This is the most important resistance you can imagine.”<sup>[34]</sup> Other experts noted that while younger nuclear physicists may be interested in military applications because of prestige, industry leadership—dominated by an older generation still influenced by the nuclear allergy—is firmly against it.

To what extent could we expect the importance of this factor to fade? First, as time passes, the younger generation will take positions of leadership in the nuclear industry, without so much aversion to nuclear weapons. However, more importantly, if/when Japan is able to develop an independent supply of nuclear fuel, the concern over international supply will be greatly mitigated.

***LDP Alliance with New Komeito.*** A significant political obstacle to a Japanese nuclear weapons program, at least in the short term, is the LDP alliance with New Komeito, an offshoot of the Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai. New Komeito (literally, “clean government”) prefers pacifist policies and would not support a Japanese nuclear option. Should the LDP pursue military nuclear capabilities, New Komeito would likely withdraw from the governing coalition, leaving the LDP in a precarious position. Although currently, the LDP has a majority in the Lower House without New Komeito, they could not sustain the majority without New Komeito support. This is because New Komeito encourages its supporters to vote for LDP candidates in elections; without this support, the LDP would not retain its control of the Diet.<sup>[35]</sup> As noted by Jun Iio, professor of government at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo, “The LDP cannot remain the ruling party without the New Komeito.”<sup>[36]</sup> One analysis showed that 80 percent of LDP candidates endorsed by New Komeito won seats in the Diet, as opposed to 55 percent of those who were not endorsed by the junior partner.<sup>[37]</sup>

To what extent could we expect the importance of this factor to fade? Unless the LDP gains strength—unlikely in the short term—they will continue to be dependent on their pacifist junior partner, which seriously hinders their ability to pursue a nuclear option. Indeed, the recent trajectory of Japanese politics has been toward a more genuine multiparty system, which will likely continue in the near to mid-term.

***The Rise of Nationalism.*** Growing Japanese nationalism is evident in both political and public circles. The controversy over the Yasukuni Shrine—and especially former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s visits to it while in office—has highlighted the issue of Japanese nationalism internationally. So has the debate over Japanese war crimes, which has simmered for years due to textbooks revisions and which boiled over this spring after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe denied the Japanese government forced Chinese and Korean women into sexual slavery. Indeed, Abe is widely seen as hawkish, on issues from constitutional revision (he believes it is inappropriate for Japan to operate under a constitution written by the United States) to military power (a number of experts believed that Abe privately favored the nuclear option). The issue of nuclear myth makers—defined by Peter Lavoy as elites who champion the benefits of nuclear weapons development—comes into play here.<sup>[38]</sup> As right-wing politicians come into power, they bring with them intellectuals who are able to promote nuclear weapons as part of the natural development of a powerful state. One potential nuclear mythmaker to watch is Ambassador Hisahiko Okazaki, an influential member of Abe’s inner circle and a public advocate of considering nuclear weapons.

In the public sphere, rising nationalism can also be seen. Manga is a popular outlet for this growing sentiment, seen in publications such *Hating the Korean Wave*. These manga argue Japan superiority and claim that the “Korean government invited the Japanese to colonize their country, so that Koreans might become enlightened by their more Westernized and modern Japanese neighbors.”<sup>[39]</sup> A popular anti-Chinese manga, *An Introduction to China*, argues that China offers nothing of value and Japanese war-time atrocities against China are little more than

fabrications.[40] The United States has not escaped the criticism, as one defense expert noted: “One manga artist, Yoshinori Kobayashi, has had some influence on younger generation’s opinion. He advocates that we revise the constitution and kill the alliance with the United States.”[41]

To what extent can we expect this factor to increase in strength over time? Nationalism will likely continue to grow in the foreseeable future. Of course, rising nationalism gives greater room for right-wing politicians to advance an agenda of independent military capability, which may include nuclear weapons. Currently, other factors weigh heavily against a nuclear option, but as those weaken, rising nationalism could increase that possibility, especially if Japan’s relations with its neighbors continue to be less than optimal.

### ***International Determinants***

Because most domestic factors work to keep Japan non-nuclear, it is likely that any change in Japanese nuclear policy will be due to international forces. A number of external factors have the potential of dramatically changing the security dialogue within Japan.

***U.S. Withdrawal.*** Should the United States withdraw from the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty or otherwise retract the nuclear umbrella, Japan will take the nuclear option much more seriously. One Japanese defense expert noted that the most important thing the United States can do to keep Japan from going nuclear is to maintain and strengthen the U.S.-Japan security relationship.[42] A U.S. withdrawal does not, however, guarantee that Japan would take the nuclear option. A number of Japanese defense analysts noted that a very strong conventional defense could take the place of a military nuclear capability. Others mentioned that because developing a second-strike capability would take years to develop, a nuclear force was less attractive—especially considering how vulnerable the small island country is to any nuclear strike. Thus, the Japanese response to U.S. disengagement would not necessarily be a nuclear one, but the potential for a nuclear Japan certainly increases.

***U.S. “Abandonment” of Japan for China.*** Japan’s long-term concern is not North Korea; it is China. With China’s aggressive, nontransparent military build-up, the Japanese are concerned about their ability to balance the potential superpower. With the United States on its side, the concern is greatly lessened. However, if Washington makes a strategic decision to align with China, the Japanese concern will spike. In such a scenario, the nuclear umbrella could technically remain in place, but its credibility would be greatly diminished. One expert noted that additional “Japan passing” could cause a gradual rethinking in Tokyo about the best ways to maintain its security.[43] Another expert was more blunt: “Don’t abandon us for China.”[44] A nuclear response would not be immediate, nor likely (as in the case of a formal U.S. withdrawal), but its likelihood does increase. This is due in part to the fact that a strengthened U.S.-China relationship could cause resurgence in Japanese militarism and could tip the balance domestically for a stronger military, including a potential nuclear option.

***Breakdown of the NPT.*** Part of what strengthens both the nuclear allergy and anti-nuclear peace groups is the international norm against nuclear proliferation. The NPT allows domestic groups to obtain legitimacy outside of their own claims by linking to an international prohibition against the spread of nuclear weapons. In fact, the peace group Peace Depot documents Japanese government pledges in NPT review conferences and then grades the government on their progress toward fulfilling those pledges. Without the NPT, such actions would not be possible. So a weakening of the NPT could result in weakening of the domestic norm against nuclear proliferation. Another side effect of an NPT collapse would be the breakdown in IAEA agreements and inspections. This web of agreements is often brought up by Japanese experts as a reason why Japan cannot go nuclear: because it would violate IAEA agreements. Finally, should the NPT fail, some Japanese fear that nuclear weapons would become conventionalized, and thus weaken domestic sentiment against a military nuclear capability. This would also raise security



concerns if nuclear weapons spread in the region, either to Taiwan or to a united Korea. Again, collapse of the NPT does not guarantee that Japan would take the nuclear option, but it does increase the odds.

**U.S. Approval.** Most of the pro-nuclear advocates in Japan (and there are not many of them, especially not publicly) predicate their advocacy on U.S. permission. As one defense expert noted, pro-nuclear advocate Okazaki has argued that “Japan does not have to take the option as long as the U.S. commitment is there, but if Japan is really pressed by a hostile power, Japan would taken an option of limited nuclear weapons to strengthen the U.S. nuclear umbrella system—just like the UK. So if Japan became really serious, they would try to persuade US leadership. It would happen within the U.S.-Japan security framework.”<sup>[45]</sup> A number of high-level officials mentioned that Japan could not go nuclear without U.S. approval.<sup>[46]</sup> Japan’s security is dependent on their relationship with the United States; a nuclear armament cannot substitute for the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, in the minds of Japanese elites. Thus, a military nuclear capability could only happen in the context of the U.S.-Japan security relationship. Of course, just because Washington gives Tokyo approval for a nuclear weapons program does not mean Tokyo will take that option. But it would mitigate concerns for right-wing proponents and potentially make them more likely to advocate openly for a Japanese nuclear weapons program.

**North Korean Nuclear Attack.** As previously mentioned, North Korea is of short-term concern to Japan, but is not seen as a long-term security threat. As Izumi and Furukawa note in their *Arms Control Today* analysis, Japan’s response to the North Korean nuclear tests is firmly “Not Going Nuclear.”<sup>[47]</sup> Additional North Korean nuclear tests would likely strain Japanese patience but would be unlikely to provoke a nuclear response. However, a North Korean nuclear attack—though seen as extremely unlikely—would potentially traumatize the nation enough to shock the public into accepting a Japanese nuclear deterrent. Indeed, such an event could potentially reframe Japanese thinking on nuclear weapons: instead of Japan being a victim of nuclear weapons, Japan would be a victim because of its lack of a nuclear deterrent. Numerous experts—from a Diet member to an JSDF official to MOD officials—all agreed that a North Korean nuclear attack would not guarantee a Japanese nuclear response, but would make it highly likely.

## Conclusions

Accurately predicting whether Japan will remain non-nuclear in the next decades requires a crystal ball. Nonetheless, examining the factors that push Tokyo away from and toward a nuclear option help us to understand both why the country may reverse its policy of nuclear forbearance and the likelihood of such a situation occurring. Currently, most domestic factors pressure Japan into maintaining its non-nuclear stance. However, severe exogenous shocks—from U.S. withdrawal to a North Korean nuclear attack—can override the influence of these domestic determinants, both by weakening them directly and by creating new security concerns that a nuclear option could potentially address. The fact that the most critical external factor in the Japanese nuclear equation—U.S. extended deterrence—lies within the control of U.S. policymakers should reassure Washington, as well as challenge it to address the other potential scenarios that could undermine Japanese nuclear forbearance.

For more insights into contemporary international security issues, see our [Strategic Insights](#) home page. To have new issues of *Strategic Insights* delivered to your Inbox, please email [ccc@nps.edu](mailto:ccc@nps.edu) with subject line "Subscribe." There is no charge, and your address will be used for no other purpose.

## References

1. Interview with author of Japanese secret study, Tokyo, July 2003. See also Yuri Kase, "The Costs and Benefits of Japan's Nuclearization: An Insight into the 1968/70 Internal Report," *The Nonproliferation Review* (Summer 2001): 55-68. This section will rely heavily on Kase, "The Costs and Benefits," because it is the only available resource on the report in question.
2. Charles J. Hanley, "Japan and the Bomb: 'Never Say Never,'" *Chicago Sun-Times*, 7 May 1995, 34.
3. Kase, "The Costs and Benefits," Op. Cit., 59.
4. By the late 1950s, the LDP hijacked the anti-nuclear issue, both to strengthen its power base and weaken its leftist opponents. According to one Japanese security expert, "The LDP tried to steal the agenda by making the antinuclear platform more general—advocating the cessation of all atomic experiments and global nuclear disarmament. They wanted it to be seen as a gesture that Japan was doing something in the international arena for disarmament, to show Japan's unique presence in international affairs and thus gain domestic support." (Interview with senior Japanese nuclear expert, Kyoto, July 2003.)
5. Selig S. Harrison, "Japan and Nuclear Weapons," in ed. Selig S. Harrison, *Japan's Nuclear Future: The Plutonium Debate and East Asian Security* (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1996), 8.
6. Yuri Kase, *The Evolution of Japan's Security Policy Towards Nuclear Weapons: 1945-1998* (Ph.D. diss., University of Southampton, 1999): 114.
7. Ibid., 113.
8. Interview with MOFA official, Tokyo, July 2003.
9. "Discretion Needed in Extension of NPT," *Asahi Shimbun* editorial quoted in *Asahi News Service*, 1 September 1993.
10. The new prime minister was a "mainstream nuclear pacifist," which may or may not have influenced the decision to support the NPT's indefinite extension. (Interview with senior Japanese nuclear expert, Kyoto, July 2003.) Nuclear pacifists typically opposed the indefinite extension because they believe it legitimizes nuclear weapons.
11. Michael J. Green and Katsuhisa Furukawa, "New Ambitions, Old Obstacles: Japan and Its Search for an Arms Control Strategy," *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2000, 2.
12. "Defense Agency Sees 'No Merit' In Japan Going Nuclear," *Kyodo News Service*, 20 February 2003.
13. "Japan Debated Nuke Arsenal," *CNN.com*, 21 February 2003, accessed January 12, 2004, available from <http://taiwansecurity.org/CNN/2003/CNN-022103.htm>.
14. Interview with senior Japanese nuclear expert, Tokyo, July 2003.
15. "North Korea Says 'Arms, Not Words' Appropriate for Dealing with Japan," *Agence France-Presse*, 11 October 2003.

16. Both Foreign Minister Taro Aso and Liberal Democratic Party policy chief Shoichi Nakagawa made repeated calls for opening discussion about a Japanese nuclear weapons program. See, for example, Keizo Nabeshima, "Even Nuclear Talk Distracts," *Japan Times*, October 30, 2006.
17. Masami Ito, "Abe Says No To Nukes But Allows Discussion," *Japan Times*, November 9, 2006.
18. Interview with senior Japanese nuclear expert, Tokyo, March 2007. See also "Report: Japan looked into developing nuclear warhead," *AP News*, December 26, 2006.
19. "Yomiuri Shimbun November Opinion Polls," *The Mansfield Asian Opinion Poll Database*, accessed June 7, 2007, available at <http://www.mansfieldfdn.org/polls/poll-06-18.htm>.
20. Interview with senior Japanese nuclear expert, Tokyo, March 2007.
21. Hajime Izumi and Katsuhisa Furukawa, "Not Going Nuclear: Japan's Response to North Korea's Nuclear Test," *Arms Control Today*, June 2007.
22. Masami Ito, "Abe Says No." The greater acceptance of a public discussion about the nuclear option.
23. Interview with senior defense official, Tokyo, March 2007.
24. In my extensive dissertation interviews in Summer 2003, not a single person raised this possibility. In my March 2007 interviews, several experts noted it as an option.
25. For example, Godzilla movies reflect the fear Japanese felt over genetic mutations caused by atomic bombs. Kennedy notes, "The [Lucky Dragon] incident also released Japan's anguish over nuclear weapons—an anxiety suppressed since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Late in 1954, Japan's Toho Studios released "Godzilla: King of the Monsters"—the story of a massive fire-breathing lizard unleashed by an atomic bomb test. Before being defeated by scientists, Godzilla wipes out military units assembled against him, and in the process destroys Tokyo." Bruce Kennedy, "The Lucky Dragon," *CNN Interactive*, accessed January 10, 2004, available from <http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/08/spotlight/>.
26. Interview with MOFA official, Tokyo, July 2003.
27. Interview with senior Japanese defense official, Yokohama, July 2003. There are many children's books on war, in which people would write about the sadness and hardships of conflict. In addition, there are many peace-oriented animation movies, which vividly describe the tragedies of war. Almost all Japanese children will have been exposed to these media. For example, one popular cartoon series chronicles the adventures of "Barefoot Gen," an atomic bomb survivor. One expert estimated 95 percent of Japanese students have read this comic book. A popular anime movie, *Tomb of a Firefly*, shows the experience of children who experience an air raid and later die. (Interview with senior Japanese nuclear expert, Tokyo, July 2003.)
28. Interview with former Japanese ambassador, Tokyo, March 2007.
29. Interview with senior Japanese defense expert, Tokyo, March 2007.
30. Interview with Peace Depot official, Tokyo, March 2007.
31. Interview with Japanese ambassador, Yokohama, August 2006.

32. Interview with Japanese defense expert, Tokyo, March 2007.
33. Eric Johnston, "Kato hits Nakagawa's nuclear suggestion," *Japan Times*, October 17, 2006.
34. Interview, senior Japanese defense expert, Tokyo, March 2007.
35. Interview, Ministry of Defense official, Tokyo, March 2007.
36. Jim Frederick, "Japan's Holy Wildcard," *Time*, November 23, 2003.
37. Ibid.
38. Peter Lavoy, "Nuclear Myths and the Causes of Nuclear Proliferation," *The Proliferation Puzzle: Why Nuclear Weapons Spread and What Results*, eds. Zachary Davis and Benjamin Frankel, London: Frank Cass, 1993, 192-212.
39. Matthew Rusling, "Comics Stoke Japan-Korea Tension," *Asia Times*, April 21, 2006.
40. Norimitsu Onishi, "Japanese fad: Comics that degrade Chinese and Koreans," *New York Times*, November 20, 2005.
41. Interview, Japanese defense expert, Tokyo, March 2007.
42. Interview, Japanese defense expert, Tokyo, March 2007.
43. Interview, Japanese defense expert, Tokyo, March 2007.
44. Interview, Japanese defense expert, Tokyo, March 2007.
45. Interview, Japanese defense expert, Tokyo, March 2007.
46. Interviews, former and current JSDF personnel, Tokyo, March 2007.
47. Hajime Izumi and Katsuhisa Furukawa, "Not Going Nuclear: Japan's Response to North Korea's Nuclear Test," *Arms Control Today*, June 2007.