



Japan's "Charlie Brown" Dilemma vis-à-vis the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

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Summary

In the 1970s Japan adopted the NPT as a cornerstone of Japanese nuclear policy together with the 'three non-nuclear principles' – that Japan does not possess or manufacture nuclear weapons and nor will it introduce nuclear weapons to Japan. Despite 25 years of a growing DPRK nuclear and missile threat, public opinion remains firmly against Japan responding by acquiring its own nuclear weapon capability. At the same time repeated efforts to find a diplomatic solution have failed. If there is any chance that North Korea would agree to abandon its nuclear weapon program, it would be only when North Korea itself becomes convinced that it was in its own interests to do so. And it will only reach that conclusion if the US and Japan maintain strongest sanctions and a credible defence (including missile defence) and deterrence postures vis-à-vis North Korea. One difficulty here is that there is always a temptation to try again a diplomatic solution to the problem. An analogy often made is that countries face Charlie Brown's dilemma: while disillusioned many times by the failure of negotiations with North Korea, there is always a temptation to run and kick the ball Lucy is holding. "This time it may be true!"

1. The recent series of nuclear and ballistic missile tests by North Korea has intensified the prospect of North Korea being able to threaten Japan, US forward deployments in the Western Pacific, and eventually the US mainland, with nuclear missile attacks. This has raised concerns about the vulnerability of Japan to such North Korean attack, and about the combined

capability of the US–Japan alliance to provide defence against such attacks. It has also raised questions about the dependability of US extended deterrence when the US mainland comes under the threat of direct North Korean nuclear attack.

2. There has been sporadic discussion amongst commentators of Japan's ability to acquire nuclear weapons and the possibility of its doing so in the future, along with a modest rise in the public discussion of the dependability of the US extended deterrence. But this does not constitute anything like a groundswell of voices calling for Japanese nuclear armament or widespread scepticism over the US deterrence capability.

Early History of the Japanese Nuclear Debate

3. Before going into a discussion of the impact of recent North Korean nuclear developments on Japan's nuclear policy, it is useful to recall the basic background of nuclear debates in Japan. The Japanese people are unique in the world in the sense that they have had direct experience of the horrible consequences of nuclear bombs. It was during the 1950s that the Japanese became concerned about possible nuclear exchanges over Japan prompted by the fierce US–Soviet nuclear competition and the sight of huge thermonuclear test detonations on Bikini Atoll.

4. The question was raised, that if Japan was now allowed to possess "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential" which Japan originally renounced under Article 9(2) of its

Constitution, just how far could Japan go. Specifically, could it possess nuclear weapons? Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi replied in 1957 that if the objective was limited to purely defensive purposes, Japan could possess nuclear weapons. That line of response still stands today. Those were the days when the use of small tactical warheads was considered a viable defence against an incoming air or naval armada or advancing tank columns. That was the time when people were not so aware of the extensive, long-lasting effects of radioactive fallout.

5. The first occasion for Japan to ask the US to affirm its nuclear extended deterrence came in 1964 when China's first nuclear weapon test led to Japanese concerns about future nuclear threats from China. Pressed by the Japanese side, President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara confirmed to visiting Prime Minister Eisaku Sato in 1965 that the American commitment to defend Japan included use of nuclear weapons.

6. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, Japan's 'non-nuclear' policy settled down into the mainstream of the Japanese body politic and challenges to those policies came to surface only as rare appearances.

7. Simultaneously, the opposition parties kept pushing the ruling conservative prime ministers about their position on Japanese nuclear armament in an attempt to cement the negative position of the government. This debate culminated in the 1967 pronouncement by Prime Minister Eisaku Sato of the famous three non-nuclear principles, that is, Japan does not possess or manufacture nuclear weapons and nor will it introduce nuclear weapons to Japan. The policy was adopted in a Diet resolution in 1971. The policy has been repeatedly reaffirmed by successive prime ministers and has come to be the basic tenet of the nuclear policy debate in Japan.

8. The Japanese debate about the retention of the option for Japan to acquire nuclear weapons peaked during the domestic debate about the ratification of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) from 1974 to 1975. The conservatives argued against ratification for the sake of holding the nuclear option open for Japan. After a persistent campaign by the government, the Diet finally approved ratification in 1976. It is interesting to note that amongst the major supporters of NPT ratification were the Japanese power companies who,

perhaps, did not want to rock the boat, when they were hard at work building Japan's civil nuclear power industry, by generating any suspicion about Japan's nuclear intentions.

9. As years passed after Japan's ratification, the NPT established itself as a cornerstone of Japanese nuclear policy together with the three non-nuclear principles. There was sporadic voicing of the view that Japan should not be closing the door to the theoretical discussion of the nuclear weapon option for Japan. But, those voices were quickly shouted down by an overwhelming reaction that Japan should not be even thinking about the option.

Recent Debates about the Nuclear Option

10. Soon after the first North Korean nuclear test in 2006, the then-majority party policy chief, the late Shoichi Nakagawa, stated that in view of the North Korean nuclear test, Japan should review whether it should maintain the three non-nuclear principles. The statement drew a strong reaction and Nakagawa was obliged to clarify that he had meant to say that, at a minimum, there should be consideration of how Japan could defend itself while at the same time adhering to the three non-nuclear principles. The then-Foreign Minister (and current Deputy Prime Minister) Taro Aso tried to defend Nakagawa, saying, "When a neighbour explodes a nuclear bomb, a variety of views should be freely discussed if Japan was not an oppressive state." He was later challenged in the Diet with a vote of no confidence for the statement.

11. On 6 August 2009, former Air Self-Defense Force chief of staff, Toshio Tamogami, said: "If Japan does not want to undergo another nuclear tragedy, it should arm itself with nuclear weapons." Prior to that remark Tamogami had been removed from his position for an article he wrote questioning whether Japan had been an aggressor during the last war. He later ran for a number of public offices but has never succeeded.

Japan's Relationship with North Korea

12. As a former colonial power that ruled the Korean Peninsula, Japan's relationship with North and South Korea after 1945 has been a rocky one at best. After Japan regained its in-

dependence under the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1952, Japan chose to recognize South Korea (Republic of Korea) as the legitimate government in Korea. It took another thirteen years until 1965 to establish diplomatic ties with South Korea thereby formally recognizing the ROK as the legitimate government of Korea. On the other hand, Japan's relations with North Korea have still not been formalized, rather remaining on a de facto basis.

13. During the 1970s North Korea started kidnapping Japanese civilians for use as trainers of spy agents. North Korean efforts culminated in the Korean Airliner bombing incident in 1987 when a father and a daughter, pretending to be Japanese passengers, placed a bomb on the plane. The daughter was arrested and later was discovered to be a North Korean agent educated by a Japanese abductee. Since then repatriation of Japanese abductees became a priority issue for Japan vis-à-vis North Korea. The number of abductees is estimated to range from over a dozen to several hundred. With a surprise visit by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to Pyongyang in 2002, and the temporary repatriation of five abductees, the problem for once seemed to be moving towards resolution – but the efforts crumbled later and North Korea went back to denial.

14. The conclusion of the 1994 Agreed Framework between the US and North Korea, which called on North Korea to freeze its suspected nuclear weapons program, came as a surprise to Japan. While welcoming the roadmap for the denuclearization of North Korea, Japan became concerned about the financial burden placed on Japan for the provision of two light water reactors to North Korea. It was also concerned by the US willingness to provide formal assurances to North Korea against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the US which would preclude the use of nuclear deterrence against the possible North Korean use of chemical and biological weapons or massive conventional aggression. In response to Japanese representations on the matter the US somehow backtracked on those assurances. And subsequently the entire Agreed Framework deal collapsed anyway.

15. From 2002 until now, Japan has engaged in an on-and-off bilateral dialogue with North Korea on the normalization of bilateral relations. Whether to include the issues of nuclear and missile development and the abductees' repatriation has always been contentious and,

due to the stiff position of North Korea, the dialogue has been sporadic. In parallel since 2003, Japan has taken part in the Six Party Talks together with the other dialogue partners China, North Korea, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the US.

16. The 1998 firing of a ballistic missile by North Korea that flew across the Japanese islands and landed 200 miles off Japan's Pacific Coast awoke the Japanese public to the threats from North Korea and, in turn, prompted the government to start cooperation to build a missile defence system with the US, and to launch Japan's own reconnaissance satellites.

Current Japanese Position vis-à-vis North Korea

17. Japan currently maintains wholesale sanctions against North Korea including prohibition on trade and on financial and human exchanges, more out of frustration with the lack of progress on the abduction question than with nuclear and missile issues. Japan still maintains the position that it seeks a diplomatic solution to the nuclear, missile and abduction questions but considers the Six Party Talks can only be useful if there is a commitment to negotiate denuclearization. During the two and a half decades of the North Korean nuclear confrontation, there have been at least three occasions when comprehensive agreements have been agreed between North Korea and the US (and other parties concerned) on abandoning the North Korean nuclear weapons program, linked with agreements on the normalization of relations and on economic assistance to be provided to North Korea. On a number of occasions South Korea pursued the Sunshine Policy to encourage peaceful solution of the issues between the North and the South.

18. These deals too collapsed at least three times leaving a strong feeling of disillusionment among the US and its allies. Now it has become clear more than ever that North Korea is determined to build up its nuclear weapon program – and that it is doing this not as a negotiating chip to win political or economic concessions. With the dwindling chance that North Korea will ever agree to denuclearization, Japan sees little prospect of reviving the Six Party Talks.¹ Even if there is a breakthrough, it would

¹ In the April 2013 opinion poll by Fuji TV after the North Korean nuclear test earlier that year, 60.6 per cent of those polled replied they did not think the nuclear/missile prob-

be difficult for Japan to agree to a deal and provide any economic assistance or lift sanctions, if the deal did not include resolution of the abduction question.

Defensive Option

19. Faced with the acceleration of the North Korean nuclear and missile developments, Japan takes a “defence and deterrence” posture, that is, it relies on the US nuclear deterrence while strengthening its defence against possible nuclear-tipped ballistic missile attack. Japan is building up its missile defence capability both qualitatively and quantitatively. Thus far, it is a two-tier system composed of ship-based SM-3 Standard interceptor missiles, and Patriot PAC3 interceptor missiles.

20. There have been occasional suggestions that eventually Japan may have to have an offensive capability to strike North Korean bases where nuclear and missile forces are located, the task currently expected of the American forces stationed in the region, and potentially also from the US mainland. For Japan to assume such a role it will have to revise its long-standing policy of maintaining only a purely defensive military capability. Due to the long-held constitutional interpretation that Japan only possesses the right of national self-defence and the accompanying policy of maintaining purely defensive weapon systems, Japan has not acquired long-range bombers, ballistic missiles, aircraft carriers or assault vessels. Even the decision to install air-refuelling gear in its fighter-bombers was the subject of a major domestic debate.

21. An opinion poll conducted in April 2013 by Fuji TV showed that 43.6 per cent of respondents considered Japan could, while preserving Japan’s strictly defensive posture, attack enemy bases if an attack on Japan was imminent. On the other hand, 43.1 per cent replied negatively. As recently as 12 January 2017, the Institute for International Policy Studies of Japan issued a set of policy recommendations that included building up offensive capabilities against North Korean missile threats.²

lem could be solved through dialogue. Only 31.9 per cent said it was possible.

² These recommendations were contained in a policy report by the US–Japan Alliance Committee of the Institute headed by Prof. Shin’ichi Kitaoka. The report recommended that offensive capabilities be only for the purpose of reacting to the enemy attacks, excluding pre-emptive at-

22. Acquisition of nuclear weapons would require even a bigger policy change for Japan. When presidential candidate Donald Trump hinted at allowing Japan and South Korea to possess nuclear weapons, the current conservative Abe cabinet, which is regarded as hawkish in Japan, quickly denied any intention to acquire nuclear weapons and reaffirmed the government would firmly maintain the three non-nuclear principles. There was no voice from outside the government calling for nuclear armament for Japan.

23. For Japan to acquire nuclear weapons, it would have to overcome the strong anti-nuclear sentiment in Japan emanating from the history of Hiroshima-Nagasaki nuclear bombings, change domestic laws which restrict nuclear activities to strictly peaceful uses, withdraw from the NPT and IAEA Safeguards, cancel the US–Japan nuclear cooperation agreement, and face international sanctions and condemnation. This could only happen were Japan and the US to sever their cooperative relationship and Japan realizes it has to defend itself by itself – not just theoretically, but in reality, against threats that can only be met by nuclear deterrence.

24. According to a public opinion poll conducted by the Genron NPO (a Japanese non-profit think-tank) in June–July 2016, 80.3 per cent of respondents were opposed to Japan becoming nuclear armed, while only 5.1 per cent supported it (14.5 per cent chose ‘don’t know’). Unlike in Korea, where nuclear armament for Korea is actively debated and public opinion polls are frequently conducted, there have been few public opinion polls conducted recently in Japan on these issues. It is not an actively debated subject and apparently it is not an interesting subject for the pollsters to survey.

Prospect of North Korea Agreeing to Denuclearization

25. If there is any chance North Korea agrees to abandon its nuclear weapon program, it would be only when North Korea itself becomes convinced that it was in its own interests to do so. For this to happen, North Korea has to become convinced that:

tacks. Prof. Kitaoka led the policy panel that recommended the constitutional interpretation to allow the exercise of the right of collective self-defence to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who eventually enacted the reinterpretation in 2015.

- i. It is for its own benefit to open up to wholesale cooperation with the US, South Korea and other countries in order to rebuild its economy and improve the welfare of its people, rather than securing regime legitimacy through coercion;
- ii. It realizes that the maintenance of credible nuclear deterrence against the US, be it by long-range missiles in deep underground silos, on mobile launchers or in submarines, is extremely costly and ultimately damaging to regime resilience; and
- iii. It also realizes that the nuclear forces are not useful for blackmailing South Korea, Japan or the US with a view to winning political and economic concessions.

26. These scenarios are not unthinkable. One only needs to remember what happened in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. But there is no guarantee that such changes will occur and, if they do, they are likely to come suddenly. To bring about the possibility of such changes, the world has to maintain a firm stance demanding North Korean denuclearization and, to that end, maintaining powerful sanctions. The US and its allies need to maintain a firm stance and not give in to any political blackmail.

27. Accordingly the US must maintain credible defence and deterrence postures vis-à-vis North Korea so that it is not forced into accepting North Korean demands. One difficulty here is that there is always a temptation to try again a diplomatic solution to the problem. An analogy often made is that countries have to face Charlie Brown's dilemma: while disillusioned many times, there is always a temptation to run and kick the ball Lucy is holding. "This time it may be true!"

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