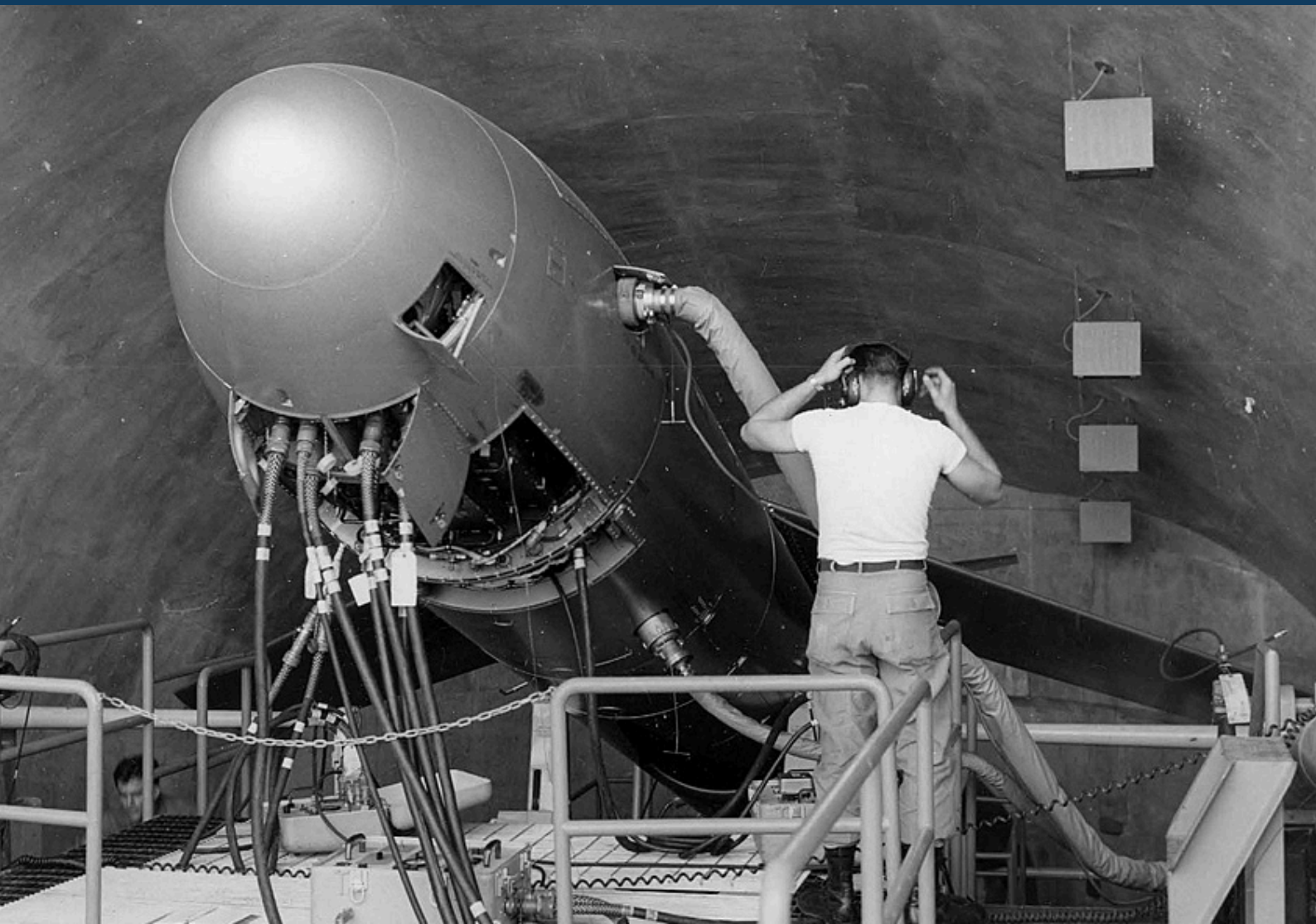




The SLCM-N and Japan's Three Non-Nuclear Principles

AUGUST 2025

HIDEO ASANO



The report was made possible through a general core grant provided to the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network by the Nuclear Threat Initiative.

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Front page:

Technicians at work on a Mace B cruise missile in a hard-site launcher on Okinawa, April 1962. Two Mace B squadrons were located in Okinawa during 1961-1970. (NARA, Still Pictures Unit, Record Group 342B, box 1470).

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: JAPAN AND US NUCLEAR WEAPONS.....	8
THE SECRET NUCLEAR DEAL AND THE “NO INTRODUCTION” PRINCIPLE	10
THE SLCM-N AND JAPANESE SECURITY	12
THE SLCM-N AND POLITICAL RISKS: FIVE OPTIONS FOR JAPAN ...	14
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	18

Acknowledgements

This report explores the political impact of the US deployment of the Nuclear-armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N) on the Japan-US alliance and Japan's Three Non-Nuclear Principles.

The author is grateful to Dr. Kimiaki Kawai, Dr. Masakatsu Ota, Dr. Michiru Nishida, Dr. Tatsujiro Suzuki and Joel Petersson-Ivre for their helpful advice and feedback.

All translations from Japanese are the author's own, unless otherwise stated.

THE SLCM-N AND JAPAN'S THREE NON-NUCLEAR PRINCIPLES

August 2025

Hideo Asano

Executive Summary

THE SLCM-N AND JAPAN'S THREE NON-NUCLEAR PRINCIPLES

Hideo Asanoⁱ

The United States is moving forward with the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) development. From a Japanese perspective, the political risk of the SLCM-N deployment for the Japan-US alliance merits attention due to the way it would force Japanese policymakers to reckon with the impact on the Three Non-Nuclear Principles of not possessing, not producing, and not permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons into the country, which Japan has upheld since 1968. Attention to these Principles faded after the US global withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons after the Cold War, but the “no introduction” issue in particular could resurface as the United States operationalises the SLCM-N.

This policy brief elaborates on the political risk associated with the SLCM-N while providing an overview of Japanese perspectives on this nuclear issue.

The United States stationed nuclear weapons in East Asia during the Cold War, and through a “secret nuclear deal” between Japan and the United States, Japan gave *de facto* tacit approval for US nuclear transits, even after the Three Non-Nuclear Principles were adopted in 1971. Today, Japanese administrations have maintained that whether or not to allow future nuclear transits is up to the government to decide.

From a Japanese security perspective, advocates argue that the SLCM-N would enhance US extended nuclear deterrence by adding a prompt and survivable low-yield nuclear option to the existing US nuclear arsenal, that could strike against Chinese and North Korean targets. Opponents argue that existing capabilities can fill this role, and that the deployment of the SLCM-N could heighten the risk of inadvertent nuclear escalation due to at-launch ambiguity, and undermine the US conventional deterrent.

The deployment of the SLCM-N also comes with political risks, most prominently from domestic backlash against any Japanese government that would allow nuclear transits. The Japanese government is thus faced with five options. It could:

1. **Seek the cancellation of the SLCM-N program.** While this option exists, it is unlikely that a Japanese government would pursue it, as it also comes with political costs for the alliance.
2. **Uphold the Principles and ensure no nuclear transits.** Tokyo could use the “New Zealand” model, forbidding nuclear transits entirely, but this might come at the cost of the entire alliance.

ⁱ The author is Coordinator at the Japan Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

3. **Maintain the Principles but tacitly allow nuclear transits.** This status quo option is less tenable than in the past, as the history of secret nuclear transits in Japan is now common knowledge.
4. **Settle the “no introduction” interpretation issue and permit nuclear transits.** The government could reinterpret the “no introduction” principle, at the risk of huge domestic backlash.
5. **Remove the no introduction principle and permit nuclear transits.** The government could also remove the principle entirely, which would not only trigger domestic backlash, but potentially open up for the deployment of US nuclear weapons on Japanese soil.

The policy brief makes three recommendations:

Do not remove the no introduction principle, and ensure public debate on its interpretation: The risks of removing the no introduction principle (Option 5) are too high and is not advisable from a Japanese security perspective.

Conduct a comprehensive and independent policy review: The United States and Japan should undertake a joint comprehensive and independent policy review on the SLCM-N to weigh its political risk against perceived security benefits, along with other costs such as nuclear risks and tradeoffs with conventional deterrence capabilities. To do so, they should commission a review by independent Japanese and US experts who address not only defense and security perspectives but also arms control and disarmament views.

Pursue arms control of theater-range nuclear missiles in the region: The United States and Japan should explore nuclear arms control options that can address the security concerns that are driving the pursuit for the SLCM-N. In order to achieve regional-level nuclear arms control and disarmament, it is important to develop collective understanding among regional parties about risks and humanitarian consequences of nuclear use, and promote the idea that taking collective actions will serve their common interests. To this end, the United States and Japan can take the lead by convening a regional conference on humanitarian impacts of nuclear use in Asia, or by exploring their cooperation with regional TPNW supporters such as ASEAN countries to facilitate nuclear disarmament education on these themes.

INTRODUCTION: JAPAN AND US NUCLEAR WEAPONS

The United States is moving forward with the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) development after the Department of Defense (DOD) was directed to establish a SLCM acquisition program. Although the Biden administration proposed cancelling the SLCM-N acquisition, the Congress continued to fund the program. The DOD is mandated to achieve the initial operational capability by 2034.¹

Arguments for and against the SLCM-N have centered around five topics: deterrence needs (or redundancy), allied assurance, nuclear risks (e.g., inadvertent escalation risk due to warhead ambiguity), opportunity costs for conventional and other nuclear capabilities, and operational challenges for the US Navy. While all of these are significant issues, an additional aspect merits serious consideration from a Japanese perspective: political risk for the Japan-US alliance.

During the Cold War, US nuclear-armed vessels were a source of political debate in Japan. Since 1968, Japan has upheld the Three Non-Nuclear Principles of not possessing, not producing, and not permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons into the country. In light of the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, US warships calling at Japanese ports invited severe political backlash from opposition parties and anti-nuclear civil society groups, who argued that the ships might be nuclear-armed and thus potentially violating the “no introduction” principle.

Attention to this issue faded after the United States withdrew its tactical nuclear weapons from overseas deployments, including those deployed on surface ships and attack submarines, through the 1991 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives. Since then, the only sea-based nuclear systems in the US arsenal have been strategic nuclear-powered submarines (SSBNs), which have never visited Japan.

The “no introduction” issue could, however, resurface as the United States operationalises the SLCM-N. This missile is most likely to be deployed on the Virginia-class attack submarines (and potentially surface ships), which have regularly called at Japanese ports. If these warships were to be armed with SLCM-Ns, anti-nuclear Japanese public and politicians would harshly criticise Tokyo and Washington, as they did during the Cold War. In this sense, the SLCM-N program carries a political risk that might strain the Japan-US alliance.

For this reason, security experts who see the SLCM-N as a net-positive for Japanese security, advocate for reviewing the “no introduction” principle of the Three Non-Nuclear Principles.²

¹ For an overview of recent developments of the SLCM-N program, see: Anya L. Fink, “Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N)”, *Congressional Research Service*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12084>.

² Their arguments have several variations. For example, some experts propose to settle the issue of how to interpret the ‘no introduction’ principle – whether or not nuclear transits are included in the scope of nuclear introduction – in a way to permit port calls by US nuclear-armed vessels. Others go further by

This policy brief aims to elaborate the political risk associated with the SLCM-N while providing an overview of Japanese perspectives on this nuclear issue. The first section outlines how Japan's current policy on nuclear transits and the Three Non-Nuclear Principle was formulated. The second section examines the SLCM-N program from a Japanese security perspective. The third section lays out the political risk of the SLCM-N by analysing five options for Japan.

Based on this analysis, this policy brief concludes that removing the no introduction principle would be unnecessary and even detrimental to Japanese security; Japan and the United States should conduct a comprehensive policy review by taking into account the political risk of the SLCM-N for alliance; and they should pursue arms control for theater-range nuclear missiles in the region.

arguing that Japan should replace the 'no introduction' principle with "not being struck" principle and permit not only nuclear transits but also a nuclear-sharing arrangement with the United States as well as land-deployment of US nuclear forces. For the latter argument, see "Toward Improving the Effectiveness of Extended Deterrence in the Japan-U.S. Alliance – To Make the "Nuclear Umbrella" Be Real –," Sasakawa Peace Foundation, June 2025, <https://www.spf.org/en/global-data/user17/Extendeddeterrencefinal20250602.pdf>.

THE SECRET NUCLEAR DEAL AND THE “NO INTRODUCTION” PRINCIPLE

During the Cold War, the United States deployed a series of nuclear weapons in East Asia, including sea-based nuclear capabilities on attack submarines and surface ships. In October 1953, the US military dispatched an aircraft carrier battle group to Yokosuka, which included the USS Oriskany aircraft carrier, capable of launching nuclear strike missions. Following that, the United States conducted naval nuclear transits through Japan, along with forward deployment of tactical nuclear weapons on Okinawa and on the Korean Peninsula. These constituted the US nuclear deterrent in East Asia, which it extended to Japan and other allies, and in which Tokyo has placed strategic value for national security.

While the United States was working to raise its nuclear umbrella over East Asia, anti-nuclear sentiment exploded in Japan after the Lucky Dragon incident in 1954, which triggered a nation-wide anti-nuclear movement. While Tokyo found the US nuclear deterrence capabilities crucial, the public became hostile toward both nuclear weapons and Washington.

In this context, the so-called “secret nuclear deal” was devised in connection with the conclusion of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security.³ In 1960, the United States and Japan ratified this revised bilateral security treaty, which introduced a “prior consultation” mechanism that requires the United States to conduct advance consultations with Japan on several important issues, including the introduction of US nuclear weapons into Japanese territory. At the same time, a secret arrangement was devised to *exclude* US nuclear transits from the scope of prior consultations. In the confidential “Record of Discussion” signed by both parties on 6 January 1960, Sentence 2.c stipulated:

“Prior” consultation will not be interpreted as affecting present procedures regarding the deployment of United States armed forces and their equipment into Japan and those for the entry of United States military aircraft and the entry into Japanese waters and ports by United States naval vessels...⁴

The US government interpreted the Record of Discussion to mean that “present procedures” including temporal transits by US nuclear-armed vessels did not require a prior consultation. Therefore, nuclear transits were understood as not part of nuclear introduction *per se*. This way, the United States could also maintain its “neither confirm

³ About the nuclear secret deal, see Masakatsu Ota, “Conceptual Twist of Japanese Nuclear Policy: Its Ambivalence and Coherence Under the US Umbrella,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1 (1): 193–208, April 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1459286>; Masakatsu Ota, *The Whole Picture of the Japan-U.S. “Secret Nuclear Deal”* [日米「核密約」の全貌] (Chikuma Shobo, 2011), 96-127 and 173-216.

⁴ “Record of Discussion (copy),” confidential, Tokyo, 6 January 1960, declassified by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs as cited in Masakatsu Ota, “Conceptual Twist of Japanese Nuclear Policy,” 199.

nor deny (NCND)” policy, which states that the United States never comments on the exact whereabouts of its nuclear weapons.

Since then, Tokyo has given a *de facto* tacit approval for US nuclear transits, even after the “Three Non-Nuclear Principles” were first announced in December 1967 and later adopted as a Diet resolution in 1971. The government did not question or object to the US position while stating in public that it could not accept port calls by nuclear-armed vessels. Tokyo reiterated that US ships calling at Japanese ports did not carry nuclear weapons because Washington had never requested prior consultation. However, few Japanese trusted this explanation, and the government faced harsh criticism from opposition parties and anti-nuclear activists when US warships visited Japan.

After the Democratic Party took office in 2009, then Foreign Minister Okada Katsuya directed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to conduct a study on the secret nuclear deal. A final report by the Ministry’s panel of experts was released in 2010, stating that “[a]lthough the Japanese government did not agree with the US government’s interpretation of the “Record of Discussion”... it did not press the US government to revise their interpretation, and in effect tacitly accepted that nuclear-armed vessels called at ports without prior consultation.”⁵ The report concluded that there was a secret deal in the broad sense between the United States and Japan as a form of tacit agreement.

In connection with this investigation, Okada elaborated on the government’s position on nuclear introduction in 2010. While Tokyo upheld the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, he also stated, “If an emergency were to occur and Japan’s security could not be ensured without permitting a temporal port call by a nuclear-armed vessel, an administration of that time would make a decision by staking its political fate on it and explain it to the people.”⁶ Although previous governments had articulated, at least in public, that they could not accept port calls by nuclear-armed warships under the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, Okada left this matter up to future administrations, suggesting that the stance of the Japanese government was to potentially admit nuclear transits in an emergency. Successive Japanese administrations have maintained this position on the issue until today.⁷

As the SLCM-N development progresses, Japan will sooner or later be asked what position it takes toward the Three Non-Nuclear Principles and nuclear transit. Once the SLCM-N operation commences, the United States would claim that its vessels, regardless

⁵ “Expert Committee’s Report on the So-Called ‘Secret Deal’ [いわゆる「密約」問題に関する有識者委員会報告書],” 9 March, 2010, 45-46, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/mitsuyaku/pdfs/hokoku_yushiki.pdf.

⁶ Okada’s statement [in Japanese] can be found at <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/detail?minId=117403968X00520100317¤t=5>.

⁷ For example, former Prime Minister Kishida Fumio stated in 2022 that his administration maintained the position that Okada described in 2010. Kishida’s statement [Japanese] can be found at <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/detail?minId=120805254X01620220331¤t=2>.

of whether they are nuclear-armed or not, may call at Japanese ports without prior consultation based on the Record of Discussion. Hence, Tokyo should carefully formulate its own position by scrutinising the expected costs, risks and benefits of the SLCM-N for Japan, and evaluate its policy options. Otherwise, the SLCM-N deployment might commence without due consideration for Japan's national interest despite the significant security and political implications the deployment would entail.

THE SLCM-N AND JAPANESE SECURITY

From a Japanese security perspective, while the SLCM-N may strengthen the US nuclear umbrella, it also carries serious risks for nuclear escalation and accelerated arms racing, and could undermine conventional deterrence of the Japan-US alliance in East Asia.

Advocates argue that the SLCM-N would enhance US extended nuclear deterrence by adding a prompt and survivable low-yield nuclear option to the existing US nuclear arsenal. In East Asia, China is deploying and expanding the DF-26 system, a nuclear-capable intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM), which can strike US and Japanese military bases in-theatre. There is growing concern that Beijing might threaten to use – or use in a limited manner – these nuclear-armed missiles in a military conflict over Taiwan. Advocates make the case that the SLCM-N deployment in East Asia would serve as a credible deterrent against these Chinese nuclear threats by providing a proportionate nuclear option, as well as by indicating nuclear presence within the theater.⁸ Additionally, if a conventional war over Taiwan turns against the United States, it could employ a low-yield SLCM-N to defeat Chinese invasion forces gathered near Taiwanese shores⁹ or against Chinese hardened targets. In this way, the SLCM-N is expected to close a gap in the escalation ladder vis-à-vis China.

Also, some experts claim that the SLCM-N could be used to destroy Chinese and North Korean nuclear forces that would otherwise be used during a conflict.¹⁰ This way, the SLCM-N would play a critical role not only for deterrence but also for damage limitation. Given these security contributions at the theater-level, advocates believe that the SLCM-N would contribute to assuring regional US allies like Japan of the

⁸ Office for the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, “Strengthening Deterrence and Reducing Nuclear Risks, Part II: The Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N),” U.S. Department of Defense, July 23, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/T-Paper-series-SLCM-N-Final-508.pdf>; and John R. Harvey and Rob Soofer, “Strengthening Deterrence with SLCM-N,” Atlantic Council, November 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Strengthening-Deterrence-with-SLCM-N.pdf>.

⁹ Greg Weaver, “The Role of Nuclear Weapons in a Taiwan Crisis,” Atlantic Council, November 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Weaver-Role-of-Nuclear-Weapons-in-Taiwan-Crisis.pdf>.

¹⁰ Masashi Murano, “What the New US Nuclear Posture Means for Northeast Asia,” *The Diplomat*, August 29, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/what-the-new-us-nuclear-posture-means-for-northeast-asia/>.

credibility of the US extended nuclear deterrence and the US commitment to their defense.

While acknowledging these security benefits, other experts argue that most of them can be achieved through existing US nuclear options – submarine- and air-launched low-yield nuclear arsenals – and hence conclude that the SLCM-N is redundant in most cases and not necessarily an essential nuclear capability.¹¹

For critics, the SLCM-N would heighten the risk of inadvertent nuclear escalation due to at-launch ambiguity. After the SLCM-N is deployed, there is serious risk that adversaries might misinterpret US strikes with conventionally-armed cruise missiles as nuclear attacks because warheads on these missiles are indistinguishable until detonation.¹² This risk is concerning for Tokyo and Washington as they highly value their burgeoning cruise missile arsenals for countering China and North Korea. Beijing may become more likely to misinterpret given a growing perception in China that Washington would go nuclear first in a US-Sino conflict with its limited nuclear options.¹³ While this escalation risk is not new – the US low-yield SLBMs carry a risk that their use would be mistaken as larger-scale strategic nuclear strikes in a nuclear war – the SLCM-N will introduce the risk of an inadvertent nuclear war at a lower rung of a conventional conflict.

Even if the US nuclear deterrent would be strengthened by the SLCM-N, that could come at the expense of the US-Japan conventional deterrent in the region. Implementing the program will come with budgetary and capacity tradeoffs for conventionally-armed naval capabilities without a drastic expansion of the Navy's capabilities.¹⁴ It would also pose operational challenges to the Navy, especially by constraining any launch of conventional cruise missiles in a direction where it could be misinterpreted as a nuclear strike.¹⁵ Assigning nuclear missions to US vessels may also create controversy and

¹¹ Michiru Nishida, "Are U.S. Nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missiles Necessary? A Japanese Security Analysis," Briefer (No.30), Council on Strategic Risk, February 9, 2022, https://councilonstrategicrisks.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Are-U.S.-Nuclear-Sea-Launched-Cruise-Missiles-Necessary_A-Japanese-Security-Analysis_BRIEFER-30_2022_02_09.pdf.

¹² Robert J. Goldston, "A New Nuclear-armed, Sea-launched Cruise Missile: Just Say No," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July 19, 2023, <https://thebulletin.org/2023/07/a-new-nuclear-armed-sea-launched-cruise-missile-just-say-no/>.

¹³ Henrik Stålhane Hiim, M. Taylor Fravel and Magnus Langset Trøan, "The Dynamics of an Entangled Security Dilemma: China's Changing Nuclear Posture," *International Security* 47(4): 147–187, January 2023, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00457.

¹⁴ For example, see Douglas Barrie, Nick Childs and Tim Wright, "Sub-optimal Deterrence, SLCM-N and the US Posture," Military Balance Blog, International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 6, 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/ja-JP/online-analysis/military-balance/2022/05/sub-optimal-deterrence-slcm-n-and-the-us-posture/>; David W. Kearns, "Cancelling the New Sea-Launched Nuclear Cruise Missile Is the Right Move," *War on the Rocks*, December 5, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/12/cancelling-the-new-sea-launched-nuclear-cruise-missile-is-the-right-move/>.

¹⁵ For this argument as it applies to the AUKUS submarines, see: John Gower, "AUKUS After San Diego: The Real Challenges and Nuclear Risks," Policy Brief, Asia Pacific Leadership Network for

protests whenever US vessels call at Japanese ports, even if those vessels are not nuclear-armed.

Finally, SLCM-N deployment could be used as justification by security hawks in China and North Korea for further nuclear modernisation and build-up, accelerating a negative security spiral in East Asia.

THE SLCM-N AND POLITICAL RISKS: FIVE OPTIONS FOR JAPAN

Looking at the Japanese political landscape, the majority of political parties – not only liberal opposition parties but also the Komei Party, the ruling coalition party – have consistently indicated their position to uphold the Three Non-Nuclear Principles. A recent public poll in 2025 showed that more than 60 per cent agreed that Japan should uphold the Principles while only 14 per cent disagreed.¹⁶ Asked whether Japan should revise the no introduction principle, 54 per cent disagreed with this view while 35 per cent agreed.¹⁷ Even though there are growing calls from Japanese conservatives to review the Principles, upholding the principles still retains majority support in Japan.

This public support suggests that while the SLCM-N deployment might assure conservative policy makers and populations, as is often advocated, it could upset a broader part of Japanese society, namely, political liberals and the anti-nuclear public, which would lead to political backlash against Tokyo and Washington. Since the Three Non-Nuclear Principles have historically constituted a principal part of Japan's identity as a pacifist country, the seriousness of revising the Principles cannot be overstated. Therefore, allowing US nuclear transits or revising the principles for the SLCM-N operation carry a political risk that could undermine Japan-US relations at a time when alliance cohesion would be critical for maintaining peace and stability in East Asia.

The degree of risk depends on which options Japan would choose in the face of the SLCM-N development. The following section discusses five options for Japan and analyses potential risks associated with each path.

Option 1: Seek the cancellation of the SLCM-N program

By weighing expected benefits and costs of the SLCM-N for Japan, the government can push for its cancellation. However, this option would be challenging given that the United States is already moving forward with the SLCM-N development and the US Congress has consistently supported the program. Therefore, pursuing the cancellation

Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, March 2023, <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PB-99-Gower.pdf>.

¹⁶ “The Public Opinion Poll by ROLES, the University of Tokyo: Security, Alliance, and Foreign Engagement Research (SAFER) project [東京大学 ROLES 世論調査 SAFER],” Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology (ROLES) of the University of Tokyo, March 2025, 20, <https://roles.rcast.u-tokyo.ac.jp/uploads/publication/file/163/publication.pdf>.

¹⁷ “Survey: 67% of Japanese favor sanctions against Russia,” *Asahi Shimbun*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/1457862>; For the original question and result of this public opinion poll [Japanese], see <https://digital.asahi.com/articles/ASQ3P4VL3Q3PUZPS005.html>.

would draw negative reactions from the US government and Congress unless both parties agree on this option, potentially creating a cleavage in the US-Japan alliance. Also, it should be recalled that the Japanese government displayed concern when the Obama administration moved to retire the nuclear-armed Tomahawk cruise missile. This suggests that Tokyo finds security-value in such theater-level nuclear cruise missiles.¹⁸

Option 2: Uphold the Principles and ensure no nuclear transits

The second option is to uphold the Three Non-Nuclear Principles while seeking to ensure that nuclear-armed warships do not call at Japanese ports. This can be achieved through either Japan's decision to refuse nuclear transits or a US arrangement to assure that its nuclear-armed vessels do not visit Japanese ports.

The most controversial way for Tokyo is to prohibit nuclear transits through its legislation. This could be called a "New Zealand" model. New Zealand legally banned port visits by nuclear-armed ships. Its "Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act 1987" stipulates that a prime minister will approve entry into the country's waters only if they are satisfied that "the warships will not be carrying any nuclear explosive device" with all relevant information and advice available.¹⁹ This allows New Zealand to make unilateral judgement on whether to permit nuclear transits without being affected by the US NCND policy. Japan can emulate this arrangement if it wishes to refuse port calls by US nuclear-armed warships. However, pursuing this option would upset the US and seriously damage the bilateral alliance. The US government terminated its alliance with New Zealand after the Act 1987 was introduced.

Another possible way is to ask the United States to make an arrangement which can ensure that no nuclear-armed warships (and only conventionally-armed ones) call at Japanese ports. For example, the US Navy could separate its conventionally-armed warships from those with nuclear missions. Based on this distinction, Washington could promise that only the former would make port calls in Japan. To verify this, Japan could mandate the US to submit a "non-nuclear certificate"²⁰ to relevant Japanese ministries when conventional US warships enter Japan, and make the certificate available to the Japanese public.

However, the US government would be averse to this idea because it runs counter to the NCND policy, as well as setting a precedent for other foreign countries to refuse US nuclear transits. This arrangement would also complicate the US Navy's operational

¹⁸ Masakatsu Ota, "Japan Lobbied for Robust Nuclear Umbrella Before Power Shift," Kyodo News, November 23, 2009, <https://www.hiroshimapeacemedia.jp/?p=14766>.

¹⁹ The full text can be found at: "New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act 1987 No 86" (1987), <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1987/0086/latest/DLM115116.html>.

²⁰ Based on the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, Kobe city passed a resolution in 1975 to direct foreign ships entering the Kobe port to submit a non-nuclear certificate to certify that they do not carry nuclear weapons. This is called the "Non-Nuclear Kobe Formula" – a municipal initiative to complement the Three Non-Nuclear Principles. While this model is at the city-level, this arrangement could be applied at the national level.

flexibility in the theater, potentially undermining the overall Japan-US conventional deterrence.

Option 3: Maintain the Principles but tacitly allow nuclear transits

The third option is to follow the same practice as the United States and Japan engaged during the Cold War – Tokyo maintains the Three Non-Nuclear Principles (at least in public) while tacitly allowing port calls by US nuclear-armed vessels.

However, if this arrangement is implemented and eventually made public, that would deal a serious political blow to a Japanese administration of that time and the US-Japan relations. As the history of secret nuclear transits in Japan is now common knowledge and the Japanese public knows the SLCM-N will be deployed on US warships, Tokyo would find it difficult to get away with criticism by resorting to the same excuse that it did in the past, when it claimed that “nuclear-armed warships do not visit Japan because the US has not requested prior consultation.” The Japanese public would likely believe that their government is lying and breaching the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, and anti-US sentiments would grow significantly. Politicians supportive of the Principles would also bitterly attack the administration for destroying Japan’s identity as a pacifist country or subordinating itself to Washington.

Option 4: Settle the “no introduction” interpretation issue and permit nuclear transits

The fourth option for the government is to publicly declare that nuclear transits do not violate the ‘no introduction’ principle and permit port calls by US nuclear-armed vessels. This means that Tokyo would officially turn the Three Non-Nuclear Principles into the “Two-Point-Five Principles,” and nuclear-armed warships can freely enter Japanese ports.²¹ The government and politicians can initiate discussion on the interpretation of no introduction and decide to exclude nuclear transits from nuclear introduction at the time of the SLCM-N operation.

However, similar to the third option, bringing up this discussion would cause no small critical reaction. It would be unacceptable for the anti-nuclear Japanese public and politicians that their government officially admits the entry of nuclear-armed ships into Japan, resulting in harsh criticism against Tokyo and Washington.

Option 5: Remove the no introduction principle and permit nuclear transits

The fifth option is to remove the ‘no introduction’ principle from the Three Non-Nuclear Principles to permit nuclear transits. While drawing far more severe political backlash than the above options, this would also open pathways to introduce land-deployed nuclear capabilities in Japan. For example, without the ‘no introduction’ principle, the US military would be free to permanently deploy its nuclear-armed missiles and bombers on its bases in Japan. If both wish, Washington and Tokyo could also introduce a nuclear-sharing arrangement by storing US nuclear warheads on

²¹ Michiru Nishida, “Changing Security Environment in East Asia and Its Implications on Japan’s Nuclear Policy.” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 6 (2): 327–45, November 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2023.2285024>.

Japanese territory, to be carried by Japanese fighter jets. While these ideas do not garner wider support in Japan, some former high-ranking officials of the Japanese government and the Self Defense Force have proposed them to strengthen the US extended nuclear deterrence.²²

However, as Japanese security experts have reiterated, introducing a NATO-type nuclear-sharing arrangement could incentivise regional adversaries to carry out preventative strikes on known warhead storage or staging sites in Japan. This would undermine crisis stability and increase nuclear risk. The same would apply to cases where the United States deploys its nuclear-armed missiles or bombers on Japanese soil.

Renouncing the no introduction principle could also be used as an excuse by security hawks for further nuclear buildup and modernisation in regional countries such as China and North Korea. It could also encourage calls for reintroducing US nuclear weapons to South Korean territory. For these reasons, this option would be detrimental to Japanese and regional security.

Furthermore, revising the Principles (the fourth and fifth option) would seriously discredit Japan's long-standing position as the sole country that has suffered the wartime atomic bombings to lead international efforts to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons. It would have negative implications for global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

There are five options that Japan can pursue as the United States develops its SLCM-N. However, Japanese leaders would have a strong incentive to defer this issue to the future because no one would be willing to take up this politically sensitive debate at the risk of facing a potentially fatal backlash and undermining the Japan-US alliance. As a result, the most-likely scenario is that Tokyo would pursue the status-quo option of maintaining the Principles while tacitly allowing nuclear transits, without due consideration for the implications of doing so. However, given the significant political and security stakes for Japan, there should be extensive public and political debate on this issue before the United States begins operating the SLCM-N.

²² "Toward Improving the Effectiveness of Extended Deterrence in the Japan-U.S. Alliance," Sasakawa Peace Foundation, June 2, 2025.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Do not remove the no introduction principle: Even for those who would support the SLCM-N, there should be no need to remove the no introduction principle (Option 5). Removing the principle could open pathways to allowing land-deployment of nuclear arsenals in Japan and negatively affecting crisis stability. For this reason, advocating for removing the no introduction principle in connection with the SLCM-N would be detrimental to Japanese security.

Conduct a comprehensive and independent policy review: The SLCM-N program carries no small political risk of undermining the Japan-US alliance – this is a rarely considered aspect of the SLCM-N debate. This risk should be taken more seriously by both countries at a time when they both view the alliance as crucial to addressing regional security threats. Therefore, the United States and Japan should undertake a comprehensive policy review on the SLCM-N to weigh its political risk against perceived security benefits, along with other costs such as nuclear risks and tradeoffs with conventional deterrence capabilities. To do so, they should commission a review by independent Japanese and US experts who address not only defense and security perspectives but also arms control and disarmament views. Finally, given the significant security and political implications for Japan, Tokyo should explain its view on the SLCM-N, to facilitate public accountability and more open public and political debate in Japan. Based on the comprehensive analysis and discussion, both governments should keep reviewing their positions toward the SLCM-N.

While legal perspectives are outside the scope of this policy brief, they must be taken into account for a thorough policy analysis. Nuclear-dependent states with security interests in East Asia must ensure that their nuclear policies adhere to applicable international laws. For example, the International Court of Justice observed in its 1996 Advisory Opinion that no states indicated “precise circumstances” that could legally justify limited nuclear use nor did they show that “such limited use would not tend to escalate into the all-out use of high yield nuclear weapons.” As all states are bound by the “cardinal principles”²³ of international humanitarian law, which regulate the means and methods of warfare, even the use of tactical nuclear weapons such as the SLCM-N may not comply with these principles. It is also noteworthy that Russia, China, North Korea, South Korea, and Japan are all parties without reservation to Articles 51(6) and 52(1) of the Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions, which prohibit armed attacks against civilians and civilian objects even as belligerent reprisals.²⁴

²³ International Court of Justice, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons, Advisory Opinion*, *I.C.J. Reports 1996*, 257, para.78.

²⁴ Kimiaki Kawai, “Japan’s Reliance on US Extended Nuclear Deterrence: Legality of Use Matters Today,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 5 (1): 162–184, May 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2022.2071053>; Kimiaki Kawai, “Still Lawful after All These Years?—Universalizing the TPNW through Examining Legal Questions related to the Nuclear Deterrence Policy,”

Pursue arms control of theater-range nuclear missiles in the region: The United States and Japan should explore nuclear arms control options that can address the security concerns that are driving the pursuit for the SLCM-N. For example, they could propose a mutual moratorium or a legal ban on loading nuclear warheads on ground-based theater-range missiles with China. This would help address US and Japanese security concerns by restricting Chinese theater-range nuclear capabilities. This framework would also benefit Beijing that US and Japanese regionally-deployed missiles would not be nuclear-armed.²⁵ Going further, they should explore numerical cap and, more ambitiously, reduction of theater-range missiles in the region.²⁶ Such measures would help further regional nuclear disarmament and achieve a nuclear-free region.

In order to achieve regional-level nuclear arms control and disarmament, it is important to develop collective understanding among regional parties about risks and humanitarian consequences of nuclear use, and promote the idea that taking collective actions will serve their common interests. To this end, the United States and Japan can take the lead by convening a regional conference on humanitarian impacts of nuclear use in Asia,²⁷ or by exploring their cooperation with regional TPNW supporters such as ASEAN countries to facilitate nuclear disarmament education on these themes.

RECNA Policy Paper 20 Revised Edition, July 2024, <https://www.recna.nagasaki-u.ac.jp/recna/bd/files/REC-PP-20-E.pdf>.

²⁵ To avoid misunderstanding, the United States and Japan have repeatedly indicated that their land-based medium- and intermediate-range missiles will only be armed with conventional warheads. However, from the Chinese perspective, this declaratory policy could be easily withdrawn.

²⁶ These proposals have been put forward by Japanese and US nuclear experts. For example, see Michiru Nishida, “A Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone in Northeast Asia: From a Japanese Security Perspective,” In Gregory Kulacki, Jae-Jun Suh, Keiko Nakamura and Tatsujiro Suzuki (eds.), *Getting to Nuclear Zero in Northeast Asia: The Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone as a Vehicle for Change*, Routledge, June 2025, <https://doi.org/10.4324/978100359544>; Laurel Baker, “Interview: Rose Gottemoeller on the precarious future of arms control,” July 29, 2024, Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, <https://thebulletin.org/2024/07/interview-rose-gottemoeller-on-the-precarious-future-of-arms-control/>.

²⁷ Former senior US officials and nuclear experts, for example, have argued that Japan should lead the convening of an international conference on the impacts of nuclear weapons to mark the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. See Thomas Countryman, Shizuka Kuramitsu and Daryl G. Kimball, “OPINION: How PM Can Help Renew Action for Disarmament on 80th Anniversary,” September 7, 2024, *Kyodo News*, <https://english.kyodonews.net/articles/-/49914>.

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