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Japan's Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Policy

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Introduction: The framework and issues stipulating Japan's nuclear policy

In seeking to grasp the structure used to stipulate Japan's disarmament and non-proliferation policy, it can be said to be useful to become acquainted with the framework of the "Four Pillars of Nuclear Policy," along with three primary factors and two dilemmas. To begin, the "Four Pillars of Nuclear Policy" refers to the four approaches comprising Japanese nuclear policy announced in the administrative policy speech delivered by the then Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato in January of 1968. More specifically, this consists of the three "non-nuclear principles" (non-possession, non-production, and non-introduction of nuclear weapons); nuclear abolition and disarmament; reliance upon the US for nuclear deterrence; and peaceful use of nuclear energy. In retrospect, these four pillars have been generally upheld over the years to date.

It is also vital to consider three elements as the specific factors which effectively define Japanese nuclear policy. The first concerns the geopolitical conditions in East Asia. The second is the economic growth and its sustainability, and particularly the need for energy security. The third is the historical experiences which functioned to heighten anti-nuclear sentiment and momentum within Japan. Among these experiences, I am referring

to the detonation of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki toward the end of World War II (with Japan still the only nation to have endured atomic bombings), and the "Daigo Fukuryu Maru Incident" in 1954.

Meanwhile, as the outgrowth of these policies and the factors comprising their foundation, Japan has also been confronted with two dilemmas. The first comprises promotion of nuclear disarmament as the national mission of the sole country to ever come under atomic attack, versus the reality that within the current fierce strategic environment, the extended nuclear deterrence of the US has become indispensable for Japanese security. The second dilemma concerns the fact that while Japan, as a nation severely poor in natural resources, has pursued the so-called nuclear fuel cycle rooted in the demands for energy security, that the nuclear fuel cycle is inevitably accompanied by the risk of nuclear proliferation.

Nuclear disarmament and the Japan-US alliance

(1) Cultivation of domestic anti-nuclear sentiment and the Japan-US Security Treaty

In August of 1945, atomic bombs were successively dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, causing the deaths of approximately 140,000 and 74,000 persons, respectively, by the end of that year. In

March 1954, the “Daigo Fukuryu Maru,” a deep-sea tuna fishing boat operating in Bikini Atoll of the Marshall Island in the South Pacific, was exposed to radioactive fallout from a hydrogen bomb test conducted by the US. This resulted in contamination from radiation to the crew members and their fish catch. The tuna boat incident prompted the launch of an anti-nuclear petition drive by housewives in the Suginami Ward district of Tokyo, which soon grew nationwide in scale. In August of that same year, the Japan Council for Signature Campaign Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs was formed. While in its early days this campaign flourished as a bipartisan national movement, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) subsequently withdrew. After that, the effort split off to come a movement championed by the Japanese Communist Party and Japan Socialist Party. Assuming elements of partisanship in this way, the endeavor retreated from its former presence as a national campaign. Within Japanese society, however, I believe it can also be said that the standard for nuclear abolition had taken root as what came to be known as the “nuclear allergy.”

On the other hand, security-related demands heightened with regard to extended nuclear deterrence offered by the United States. For example, China conducted its first successful nuclear test in October 1964, thereby emerging as a nuclear-capable state. For Japan as well, this triggered debate on

whether or not the nation should maintain nuclear weapons. Within Japan, however, where anti-nuclear sentiment was on the rise, objections voiced with regard to the return of Okinawa to Japan with the nuclear capabilities there as-is were by no means limited in number—including many protests from within the LDP. Politically speaking, it was extremely important for the then-Prime Minister Eisaku Sato to engineer the return of a “nuclear-free” Okinawa in his negotiations with Washington. As this process unfolded, in December 1967 Sato declared the previously mentioned three non-nuclear principles of “non-possession,” “non-production,” and “non-introduction.” Later on, these three ideologies led to him being named the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate in 1974.

(2) The “nuclear issue” in the context of the Japan-US alliance

As this came to pass, however, a secret agreement was signed between Sato and US President Richard Nixon, which effectively recognized the introduction of nuclear weapons in Japan by US forces in the event of emergencies. Then in 1981, former US Ambassador to Japan Edwin O. Reischauer revealed that US Navy warships had routinely carried nuclear weapons into Japanese ports under the understanding between Japan and the US. This brought to light the reality that the “non-introduction” principle had not in fact been upheld. In 1991, President

George H.W. Bush declared the withdrawal of both ground and sea deployed strategic nuclear weapons on Japanese soil, bringing an end to Japan port calls of warships carrying such arms.

Today, the single greatest challenge in the relations between Japan and the US consists of how to uphold the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence. In 2009, as work was being advanced on the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) under the administration of President Barrack Obama, debate developed on the issue of No-First Use (NFU; the pledge to never use nuclear arms as initial means), the move toward professed “sole purpose” (limiting the role of atomic arms to deterrence of and retaliation against nuclear attacks) and other diminishing roles of nuclear weapons. Within this process, at hearings convened by the Strategic Posture Committee of the US Congress that same year, the Japanese government voiced concerns that such a declaratory policy would inevitably lower US nuclear deterrence in East Asia. As it turned out, in addition to Japan, South Korea, European allies and other nations also voiced anxieties about such a declaratory policy, with the result that the US failed to pronounce the unconditional introduction of NFU. This process potently suggests the need for greater alignment of the recognition and understanding of allies surrounding extended nuclear deterrence between the governments of Japan and the US (as well as within both governments).

For its part, the Japanese government does not support NFU declarations and the move toward “sole purpose” by the US. There are two main reasons for this stance. The first is that in order to heighten deterrence against North Korea, in addition to nuclear weapons there is also a need to deter use of weapons of mass destruction. Along with this, in the interest of raising the threshold of use as well, it will be necessary to retain the potential of retaliation using nuclear arms. The second reason relates to China, which has declared its support of NFU. Despite that, however, in view of the state of that nation’s troop buildup, military exercises and other factors, it remains unclear whether Beijing will continue to uphold NFU into the future. Moreover, within the lack of transparency and the resulting low trust placed in declarative policy, in the event that Japan and the US act on their own to declare NFU, the potential is high that greater restrictions would be placed on policies.

Against the backdrop of such conditions, the governments of Japan and the US have begun the Extended Deterrence Dialogue (EDD) with the purpose of upholding and enhancing the credibility of US extended deterrence, while moving to raise these talks to a more substantial level.

The dilemma of peaceful use of nuclear energy and nuclear non-proliferation: Energy security and nuclear power

The dearth of natural resources domestically in Japan and the nation's dependence on overseas sources of fossil fuels came to be seen as a vulnerability for the domestic economy. As one measure aimed at surmounting such a weakness, the Japanese government set its sights on energy diversification through nuclear power, as well as attainment of "semi-domestic" energy sources via promotion of the nuclear fuel cycle. However, promotion of the peaceful use of nuclear energy is effectively inseparable with nuclear non-proliferation.

With the arrival of the post-World War II era, nuclear power research activities were banned in Japan by the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (GHQ). In 1953, however, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower delivered an address at the United Nations (UN) entitled "Atoms for Peace," in which he advocated international cooperation in the supervision of nuclear materials and peaceful use of nuclear energy. With the rise of efforts to promote such global collaboration, Japan also received those benefits. Japan passed the Atomic Energy Basic Law in 1955, with an agreement concluded for Japan-US cooperation in the field of nuclear energy. In 1966, Japan

commenced its first commercial nuclear energy operation with the introduction of an improved version of the Calder Hall nuclear power station (using a graphite furnace) from Great Britain. Over the following years, however, nuclear power generation in Japan was advanced on the strength of the introduction of a steady series of light-water reactors from the US, based upon their superior technical and economic efficiency.

The 1970s were accompanied by the experiences of two serious energy crises, causing reduction of energy dependence on overseas sources to emerge as a critical issue. With that, nuclear power generation was promoted as an effective means of resolving energy security related concerns. As of 1997, nuclear energy had risen to comprise approximately 37% share of Japan's total power generation, although this was followed by a decline in that share reflecting the overall growth in energy production. Nevertheless, even at the point in time prior to the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accompanying the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, the share of nuclear power remained at around 30%.

The Fukushima accident, however, brought major change to the field of nuclear safety in Japan. The majority of the nation's nuclear power plants either failed to comply with safety standards and undergone decommissioning, or undertaken improvement work on safety facilities in seeking to adapt.

As of October 2022, only six nuclear power reactors were in actual operation (compared to 57 reactors prior to the accident).

Moreover, from the perspective of energy security, Japan has moved to reduce its dependence on overseas uranium, promoting a nuclear fuel cycle plan aimed at securing “semi-domestic” energy. This effort has failed to proceed as envisioned, however, due to the setback suffered in the “Monju” fast breeder reactor project and other setbacks. From the standpoint of energy security and technical development, Japan has held to the course of reusing spent fuel. When it comes to plans for the use of plutonium separated from such fuel, however, we can expect demands for the exercising of heightened cautions from the standpoint of nuclear non-proliferation.

Multilateral framework for disarmament diplomacy

(1) The NPT and Japan

Japan, despite its calls for promotion of nuclear disarmament as one of the “Four Pillars of Nuclear Policy,” failed to sign the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) when that agreement was originally adopted in 1968. Instead, Japan inked that pact in February 1970, just prior to it becoming effective the following month. For that matter, another six years passed before

Japan actually ratified the NPT in June 1976.

There were two main reasons for this delay in Japan’s signing and ratification of the treaty. The first lies in fears of abandonment of the nuclear option. With China succeeding in its nuclear test in 1964 to join the ranks of nuclear powers, conservative politicians and others expressed concerns that Japan’s choice to join the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state would shut off its potential to own nuclear weapons to confront Beijing.

As the second reason, concerns were expressed that acceptance of the safeguard obligations under the NPT could limit the rights for peaceful use, while also pointed out was the possibility of leakage of industrial information through inspections. In other words, fears existed that Japan would find itself at a disadvantage compared to nations that possessed nuclear arms. After it was subsequently learned that the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) had entered into a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Japan resolved the safeguard issue by also joining an “EURATOM equivalent” safeguards accord. Furthermore, with the launch of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) of nations prompted by nuclear tests by India in 1974, NPT membership became a prerequisite for international transactions for nuclear materials and equipment. These and

other developments generated further pressure for Japan to also ratify the NPT.

Overall, therefore, Japan opted to support the NPT system, which was also considered significant for the purpose of ensuring the legitimacy of peaceful use of the nation's own nuclear power, while simultaneously launching the promotion of peaceful use and the bolstering of nuclear non-proliferation. In this way, Japan effectively presented itself as an "honor student" within the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. Likewise, supported by the experiences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the strong support of domestic opinion, Japan moved to powerfully promote the cause of nuclear disarmament at international forums.

(2) Japan makes friends through the NPT

In 2007, a study entitled "A World Without Nuclear Weapons" was released by Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, George Schultz, and William Perry. Then in 2009, President Barack Obama delivered an address in Prague, in which he declared his vision for achieving the peace and security of a world free of nuclear arms. With this, the sentiment favoring nuclear disarmament was heightened. In 2010, following ratification by the NPT Review Conference of an action plan comprised of 64 items as an outcome document, Japan launched the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI) with

the purpose of advancing implementation of these visions. This initiative was comprised of 12 non-nuclear weapon states spanning a diversified range of regions and security positioning. During a session of the UN General Assembly in September of that year, convened was the first foreign ministers meeting (jointly sponsored by Japan and Australia) to address nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. This framework was subsequently adhered to in implementing joint statements by the NPT Review Conference and other bodies concerning improvements in nuclear transparency, the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), disarmament and non-proliferation education and other themes.

Around this time, another group moving to promote this type of disarmament and non-proliferation agenda was the New Agenda Coalition (NAC) originally launched in 1998 with its proclamation of "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons." Within this declaration, it is proposed that nations maintaining nuclear arms prepare a legally binding document pledging NFU. The reason that Japan, which supported promotion of nuclear disarmament, failed to join the NAC was the inclusion of this NFU clause.

Yet another coalition of like-minded nations, in which Japan did participate, was the Stockholm Initiative (SI). As divisions surrounding nuclear disarmament deepened in the international community, the SI was launched with

participation by 16 nations, seeking to raise the momentum leading to the success of the 10th NPT Review Conference (scheduled to convene in 2020). The intention was to furnish a bridge between nations recognizing the need for nuclear weapons from the perspective of security, and those insisting that nuclear arms be banned. In the quest for irreversible and verifiable nuclear disarmament, the SI undertook discussions through the so-called “stepping-stone approach” of achieving nuclear transparency, restrictions on the nuclear doctrine, measures to limit risks of escalation and other feasible realistic and concrete measures. However, with regard to restrictions on the nuclear doctrine, while NFU, “sole purpose” and other specific definitions were debated, no clear consensus was reached in that area.

(3) Japan’s stance on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

Japan, based on the experiences of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, has appealed for the inhumanity of nuclear weapons through UN resolutions, submission of documents to the NPT Review Conference and other avenues. However, with regard to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) adopted by the UN in 2017 and came into effect in 2021, Japan has maintained a cautious stance. Domestically, calls for Japan to

join the TPNW, or at least participate as an observer, are on the rise, including from the Komeito, junior partner in the ruling coalition, headed up by the LDP. Nevertheless, the Japanese government chose not to take part in the initial meeting of the parties to this treaty as an observer in June 2022. Regarding the TPNW, high-ranking Japanese government officials have recognized, albeit off the record, that they share the ultimate goals of the treaty. But even so, no mention of the TPNW was made through official documents by the time of the submission of a resolution for elimination of nuclear weapons to the UN General Assembly First Committee in October 2022.

Behind this cautious Japanese government stance lies concerns that approval of the TPNW, which bans threats of or actual use of nuclear arms, would inevitably lower the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence, as well as undermine the relationship of trust with the US. The situation in Japan differs from that of Germany—a nation which maintains an agreement for nuclear sharing with the US and is committed to working through that responsibility and a more solid system to achieve extended nuclear deterrence. Between Japan and the US, there are no systematic arrangements for sharing of the capacity, decision-making, or responsibilities concerning the use of nuclear weapons (referring to nuclear deterrence). In East Asia, in contrast, efforts by China and North Korea to strengthen

their nuclear capabilities are conspicuous, pointing to the need to search out means of enacting stronger deterrence. In the midst of such conditions, there is the desire to avoid adopting a friendly approach to the TPNW, which could very well transmit signals undermining recognition of the credibility of nuclear use in the eyes of Japan's adversaries.

(4) Nuclear abolition resolutions at the United Nations

Among initiatives in which Japan promoted nuclear disarmament at multilateral forums, there is the nuclear abolition resolution that has been submitted to the UN since 1994. Virtually every time since 1994, this resolution was adopted with approval of 150 or more member states. However, while it was accepted without dissenting votes until 1999, at the 2000 session the US chose to cast a negative vote. After that, reflecting considerations for its ties with the US, Japan has carried out adjustments aimed at avoiding US opposition. In comparison, following the adoption of the TPNW in 2017, divisions emerged in the international community surrounding nuclear disarmament. The Japanese government stance was that providing a "bridge" between those mounting strong appeals for bans on nuclear weapons and those insisting upon the need for nuclear deterrence was indispensable for the practical promotion of nuclear disarmament. Working from the perspective

of the critical need to convince nuclear weapon states to become involved in disarmament, Japan explored means of incorporating such nuclearized nations in the resolution. To Japan's consternation, however, this course of action generated backlash from countries strongly insisting upon nuclear abolition, leading to split votes on the separate adoption of several paragraphs.

These split votes can be said to symbolically express the deepened divisions in the international community, along with the fading global expectations for efforts to narrow those gaps and find common ground. This undermined efforts to maintain the Japan position.

Conclusion: The current state of disarmament and non-proliferation policy

As examined above, while the "Four Pillars of Nuclear Policy," along with three primary factors and two dilemmas, have steadily evolved over the decades, they can be said to continue to comprise the foundation of Japan's arms control disarmament and non-proliferation strategy. In this regard, it can be said that Japan currently faces the following key issues in the arms control and disarmament and non-proliferation field.

On the regional level, within the East Asia strategic environment, which continues to grow in severity linked to the strengthened nuclear capabilities

of China and North Korea, Japan faces a number of pressing challenges. For example, to what degree can efforts channeled through the Japan-US alliance (including extended nuclear deterrence) and regional partnerships be used to ensure the reliability and response capacity of deterrence targeting Beijing and Pyongyang? This encompasses the issue of how to simultaneously advance reduced nuclear risk—including arms control talks with China. Yet another related theme lies in how to realize the “denuclearization” of North Korea, a state which has conspicuously bolstered its nuclear and missile capabilities in recent years. If such progress proves difficult in the near future, what other options are available?

One particular focus lies in the area of improvements in the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence. Within the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow is using nuclear threats to seize advantages on the battlefield. As this comes to pass, the casting of the “long shadow of nuclear weapons” over an environment in which mutual deterrence between major powers tends to be functioning serves to threaten security on a regional scale. This has fanned fears in Japan of the so-called “stability and instability paradox,” fueling debate of “nuclear sharing” with the US. Going forward, depending upon the development of strategic ties between the US and China, there is the possibility that the approach of mounting deterrence against China will come to be treated as a core theme.

For China, the aim is to strengthen deterrence against the US, and use the forging of mutual vulnerability with the US to lower US influence in the region. Under these circumstances, China is said to be reluctant to engage in arms control. For Japan, there is a vital need to search out effective means of engaging with China and the US, paving the way to dialogue concerning reduction of the nuclear threat.

On the global level, a key issue consists of how Japan will contribute to upholding the credibility of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime focused on the NPT. Based on its identity as “the only nation to have endured atomic bombings,” a key focus will be on what approach Japan will use between the realistic policy demands of pursuing realization of “a world without nuclear weapons” and addressing the need for extended nuclear deterrence on the security front. At the 2022 NPT Review Conference, current Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida utilized the general discussion session to state that Japan is determined to “firmly uphold” the NPT as its “guardian.” Upon the convening of the first meeting of the International Group of Eminent Persons, Kishida declared that Japan would fulfill the role of a “bridge” for raising sentiment surrounding nuclear disarmament in the international community. On the practical front as well, Japan issued strong assertions favoring a moratorium on the production of weapons use nuclear fissile materials, action

taken out of consideration for China and the increased volume of its nuclear warheads (this proposal was rejected by China at the 2022 NPT Review Conference), greater transparency and other moves. The status of nuclear weapon possession and deployment, nuclear fissile materials production, storage and control and other information is critical for stipulating the baseline for nuclear disarmament, and enjoys wide support in the NPT community for raising transparency. This intelligence would also furnish major benefits for Japan in terms of its national security. For China, however, which was previously inferior to the US in terms of its nuclear capabilities, this is extremely delicate information from the aspect of security, prompting strong opposition to its use.

At the G7 Summit held in Hiroshima in May 2023, the "Hiroshima Vision" was compiled as the first-ever leader's statement to address nuclear disarmament at a G7 gathering. Upon that occasion, the G7 heads, as well as the leaders of India, Brazil and other participating nations, visited both the site of the atomic bombing and the Atomic Bomb Museum in Hiroshima, as well as listening to the stories of survivors of that attack. This interaction holds great significance from the aspect of upholding the international norm for sustaining the history of non-use of nuclear weapons.

For Japan, there have been steady demands over the years to adhere to

a policy of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation functioning as a balance between the realism of security and the pursuit of idealism stemming from its status as the only nation to have endured atomic bombings. The question of how to surmount the stiff challenge of achieving compatibility between these two policies, which admittedly appear contradictory in essence, promises to be the focal theme in hammering out an effective course of action toward that end.

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