

Japan's Nuclear Secrets

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Thanks to journalists such as Ota Masakatsu at Kyodo News and diligent researchers in Japan and the United States working tirelessly over the years to pry open the door into the secret history of U.S.-Japanese nuclear diplomacy, the new Japanese government has launched an investigation into whether previous governments made secret agreements with the United States that allowed nuclear-armed warships and aircraft to enter Japanese territory despite Japan's public prohibition against nuclear weapons on its territory.

A 15-person investigation team headed by Mr. Mitsuru Kitano, Assistant Vice-Minister, Minister's Secretariat, will examine several thousand files "with the intention of making clear the past situation regarding the so-called 'secret agreement'," according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The investigation is scheduled to finish by the end of November. "We will reveal everything we find," Okada recently told reporters in New York, according to Kyodo news agency.

Some people will argue that revealing secret nuclear deals will undermine U.S.-Japanese relations and weaken the credibility of the Japanese government. I think it will have exactly the opposite effect. If anything can damage U.S.-Japanese relations and weaken the credibility of the Japanese government it is precisely the covering up of the nuclear arrangement and Japanese governments denying what has been obvious to everyone for so long. Cleaning up the sins of the Cold War will only help U.S.-Japanese security cooperation move beyond it.

The Danish Precedent

The Japanese situation is similar to a case I was involved in a decade and a half ago about U.S.-Danish nuclear relations and U.S. deployments of nuclear weapons to Greenland during the Cold War. Greenland is considered Danish territory and subject to Denmark's prohibition on nuclear weapons on its territory (land, sea, and airspace). It is not a law but a policy and it has gradually become clearer since it was first announced in 1957. Throughout the Cold War, Danish governments insisted that the policy was well known to the United States and that there was no reason to suspect it was violated. Even when a bomber carrying four thermonuclear bombs crashed near Thule Air Base in northern Greenland in January 1968 and required a month-long cleanup to remove radioactive pollutants, the Danish government insisted there had been no violation and that the bomber had entered Danish airspace only because of an emergency. Yet, as in the case of Japan, declassification of U.S. documents and statements by former government officials gradually challenged the official position.

After I in 1993 showed the Danish government declassified U.S. documents describing routine overflights of Greenland by U.S. nuclear-armed bombers as part of the airborne alert program during the 1960s, the government acknowledged the overflights but disclosed the existence of a secret letter in which the Danish prime minister in 1958 had, if not authorized, then at least not objected to the U.S. bringing nuclear weapons to Greenland. This tacit approval meant, the government concluded in a 1995 report to the Danish Parliament, that the United States had acted in good faith when it deployed the bombers over Greenland. But nuclear weapons had not been deployed on the ground, the government insisted.

Yet only a few weeks later, the U.S. government informed the Danish government that nuclear weapon had, in fact, also been deployed on the ground on two occasions: 19 nuclear bombs (four of them with their nuclear plutonium core installed) for eight months in 1958, and 48 nuclear-tipped air-defense missiles in 1959-1965. The U.S. government insisted that the information was secret and warned that it would neither confirm nor deny the validity of the information if the Danish government went public. The information “and associated information involving other countries could seriously affect U.S. foreign relations,” the U.S. government said with reference to Japan and other countries where non-nuclear policies were being violated.

The Danish government decided to go public, however, and the embarrassment and public debate it triggered eventually forced the government to conduct a semi-official investigation. The final report, published in 1997, confirmed the nuclear overflights and deployments on the ground, and described a top-level management of U.S.-Danish nuclear relations where Danish officials turned a blind eye to indications that nuclear weapons were brought in. Diplomatic arrangements were made that meant that Denmark essentially had had two nuclear policies: a public policy that banned nuclear weapons, and a private policy that accepted nuclear weapons. This was a U.S.-Danish bilateral arrangement rather than a requirement from Denmark’s membership of NATO.

Yet the investigation was prevented from examining the period beyond the 1968 crash, most importantly the issue of port visits by nuclear warships. While the nuclear overflights ended the day after the 1968 crash and an addition was made to the U.S.-Danish treaty governing the defense of Greenland explicitly prohibiting nuclear weapons on the ground and in the air, the investigation failed to notice that the diplomatic “fix” omitted port visits by warships. This omission was the diplomatic “understanding” that gave tacit Danish approval to the United States to continue to send nuclear-armed warships into Danish ports despite the Danish public nuclear ban. The practice continued to cause public and diplomatic headaches – even triggered a national election in 1988 on the issue of nuclear port visits – until President George H. Bush in 1991 ordered the U.S. Navy to offload all nuclear weapons from its surface fleet.

Current Status of U.S. Pacific Nuclear Deployments

No U.S. nuclear weapon has been in Japanese ports since 1992 when the last were offloaded from warships and attack submarines. The entire surface fleet was denuclearized in 1994, and all that remains of the Pacific fleet's tactical nuclear capability are about 120 nuclear-tipped Tomahawk Land-Attack Missiles (TLAM/N). The missiles have been in storage for 17 years and it would take months to deploy them on the few attack submarines that are still equipped to carry them. The U.S. Navy does not want the TLAM/N and there are no plans to extend the life of their W80-0 warheads.

Today's U.S. nuclear posture in the Pacific is almost completely made up of long-range ballistic missiles and bombers. About 500 nuclear warheads are deployed at sea every day onboard 5-6 Trident ballistic missile submarines earmarked for potential use against North Korea, China, and targets in Eastern Russia. About 200 of the warheads are on high alert and can be launched within 12 minutes after the order is given. The other 300 warheads can be brought within range quickly, and another 700 reserve warheads can be added to the submarines if necessary.

Yet another 500 warheads on 450 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles based in the United States are targeted on Russia, while B-2 and B-52 bombers with bombs and cruise missiles provide backup to the ballistic missiles. In 2000 the Air Force began occasional forward-deployment of bombers to Guam, and since 2004 has been doing so continuously.

Finally, the nuclear-capable F-15Es of the 4th Fighter Wing at Seymour-Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina have a contingency mission to forward-deploy to bases in the Pacific if necessary. In 1998, for example, the wing conducted a simulated nuclear strike against North Korea during an exercise off the U.S. East Coast. It is unlikely that those bases are in Japan given the political sensitivity of nuclear issue and the availability of other facilities in the region.

These developments and extensive nuclear capabilities that do not depend on deployment in Japan undercut claims made by some officials that the nuclear umbrella requires retaining the option to reintroduce nuclear weapons into Japan.

Japan's Secret Nuclear Wish List

As the Japanese government is investigating whether secret nuclear deals of the past might have violated Japan's third "no," it is becoming clear that some Japanese officials recently have advocated nuclear capabilities that contradict or undercut Japanese public nuclear policy.

The final report of the U.S. Congressional Commission on the U.S. Strategic Posture recently reported that, "some U.S. allies in Asia would be very concerned by TLAM/N retirement." This sentence refers to Japan. Yet for Japanese officials to argue for retaining the TLAM/N contradicts Japan's third "no" because it endorses potential deployment of nuclear weapons on attack submarines that frequently visit

Japanese ports. If these officials were protecting Japan's third "no" they would be advocating the retirement of the TLAM/N.

Moreover, while the Japanese government has publicly advocated nuclear disarmament and supported President Barak Obama's pledge to "put an end to Cold War thinking...(and)...reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy," Japanese officials have secretly been urging the United States to retain Cold War nuclear weapons capabilities. According to U.S. sources, Japanese government officials gave the U.S. Congressional Strategic Posture Commission a paper with the following wish list for U.S. nuclear capabilities in the Pacific:

- Credible (reliable forces including modernized warheads)
- Flexible (capable of holding a variety of targets at risk)
- Responsive (able to respond to contingencies quickly)
- Discriminate (including low-yield options for minimum collateral damage)
- Stealthy (SSBN/SSN deployments)
- Visible (B-2/B-52 deployments to Guam)
- Sufficient to dissuade potential adversaries

This wish list spans the entire spectrum of Cold War nuclear capabilities, and even appears to advocate retaining nuclear forces on alert, modernizing nuclear warheads, and potential use of low-yield nuclear weapons.

The Japanese officials remain anonymous, although the final report from the Congressional Commission identifies "consultations" with the following four officials from the Japanese embassy in Washington:

- Takeo Akiba, Minister, Head of Political Section, Embassy of Japan (2009)
- Masafumi Ishii, Minister, Head of Political Section, Embassy of Japan (2008)
- Hidetoshi Iijima, First Secretary, Political Section, Embassy of Japan
- Masaaki Kanai, First Secretary, Political Section, Embassy of Japan

Whether these officials were the ones that advocated retaining the TLAM/N and the Cold War capabilities, or simply conveyed the views of higher-ranking officials in Tokyo, is unknown. Yet they have had some effect on the debate in Washington where they are used by some people to sow doubt about international support for the Obama administration's nuclear policy.

Limiting the Nuclear Mission

Beyond reductions in nuclear weapons, some Japanese officials also have raised doubts about the Obama administration's plans to reduce the mission of nuclear weapons, possibly as an outcome of the ongoing Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). Short of the ultimate goal of eliminating nuclear weapons, the Japanese concerns appear to have focused on the U.S. potentially limiting the role of nuclear weapons to deterring nuclear attacks and no longer use nuclear forces to deter chemical and biological attacks as well.

Some Japanese officials are uncomfortable with limiting the role because of North Korea's chemical and biological capabilities. The assumption appears to be that North Korea then would be more likely to attack Japan with such weapons. But given the overwhelming and demonstrated conventional capabilities the United States and its Pacific allies enjoy over North Korea, it is unclear why limiting the nuclear mission would have such a negative effect.

Moreover, since a chemical attack would not be severe enough to constitute a true WMD attack, and because a biological attack could be difficult to detect when it happens and hard to attribute to an adversary, many in the U.S. military do not see nuclear weapons as particularly useful in chemical or biological scenarios. Nuclear retaliation – certainly preemption – could be seen as overkill and the United States and its allies appear as aggressors in the eyes of the international community. Conventional forces appear much more appropriate and credible for regional scenarios.

It is important to note that removing the requirement to use nuclear weapons against chemical and biological attacks is not the same as a no-first-use policy. Although nuclear use against chemical and biological weapons would constitute first use of nuclear weapons, a policy that limited the role of nuclear weapons to deter the use of other nuclear weapons could still contain strike options that required first use. Indeed, a counterforce-focused nuclear strategy is likely to seek to destroy an adversary's nuclear forces before they can be used. And a nuclear weapon state, when faced with an adversary with such a posture, is likely to keep its nuclear forces on a high level of readiness to avoid losing them to a first strike.

Another nuclear mission envisioned by some Japanese officials is deterring a Chinese conventional attack against Japan. Although few in the U.S. military believe China's conventional modernization is directed against Japan per se, China is building conventional medium-range ballistic missile that could potentially be used to attack U.S. bases in Japan. Since this would not constitute a threat to Japan's survival as a nation, deterring conventional attacks should be a conventional mission only, not least because threatening nuclear retaliation against a conventional missile attack would be disproportionate and likely escalate the war further, something that is not in Japan's interest.

China's nuclear modernization is also not directed against Japan but other nuclear weapon states. Beyond its domestic reasons, the current Chinese nuclear modernization was partly triggered by the U.S. deployment of the Trident submarine-launched ballistic missile in the Pacific which can threaten the survivability of China's retaliatory nuclear capability. That Chinese modernization is now an increasing concern to the United States and its allies, and steps are being taken to counter it, that in turn likely will trigger additional Chinese developments.

It is important for Japan to try to break that cycle of military modernization and counter-modernization, and limiting the role of nuclear weapons in the region would be an important component of such an effort. The first step could be to

remove the nuclear mission against chemical and biological weapons. But in preparing the way forward toward deeper cuts in the future, it will become necessary to challenge the nuclear counterforce mission itself.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There are important parallels between the Japanese and Danish investigations of “secret nuclear deals” made with the United States during the Cold War. Although some will argue that investigating such issues will damage relations and weaken alliances, the Danish case shows exactly the opposite to be true. What is damaging is denying secrets that contradict public policy.

Both cases demonstrate - even before the Japanese investigation is complete - that nuclear diplomacy is not merely a problem of nuclear powers violating the policies of non-nuclear countries, but also a willingness on the part of national governments to play along even to the point of deceiving their own people in the name of nuclear weapons.

This is another reason why nuclear weapons are so dangerous; because they are so powerful and promise so much, they pervert governments into violating the very democratic pillars of civilian oversight and government accountability they are ultimately supposed to protect.

As I point out in this article, secret dealing is not only a characteristic of the Cold War, but apparently continues today in ways that appear to conflict with Japan’s public nuclear policy.

Do the Japanese officials that secretly advocate retaining the TLAM/N and Cold War nuclear capabilities in the Pacific understand the U.S. nuclear posture in general and the nuclear umbrella in particular? The Japanese government is not consulted very much by the U.S. about the plans, and some U.S. officials say the Japanese officials may simply be copying what they have read about U.S.-NATO Cold War nuclear strategy and mixed it with leaks from the Bush administration’s Nuclear Posture Review in 2001.

To fix this problem, it is important to improve the consultative process between the United States and Japan so that misperceptions don’t develop in Tokyo and Washington about what the other country’s policy is. But to avoid that this improved process becomes another avenue for secret nuclear deals that contradict Japan’s public nuclear policy, it is essential that the Japanese officials that handle this issue in the future not be an insulated bureaucratic clique but part of a public and democratic debate.