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Conceptual Twist of Japanese Nuclear Policy: Its Ambivalence and Coherence Under the US Umbrella

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ABSTRACT

Despite its anti-nuclear weapon declaratory-policy, “Three Non-Nuclear Principles,” Japan has enjoyed the protection of the nuclear umbrella provided by the United States for more than 60 years. This bilateral nuclear arrangement has established and cherished a strong bond between the two nations, which the author calls “the US–Japan Nuclear Alliance.” This unique politico-military alliance, backed by US nuclear forces, has brought about a “conceptual twist” of Japanese security policy related to nuclear weapons. The twist can be analyzed in terms of two characteristic elements: ambivalence and coherence. This twist is a result of several factors, including Japan’s unprecedented experience of the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, Japan’s anti-nuclear public sentiment, the Japanese security policy discourse delineated by Cold War strategies of the US, and Tokyo’s acceptance of the US nuclear umbrella. These factors have forced Japanese conservative governments, including the current Abe administration, to perform *Nuclear Kabuki Play* resulting from the ambivalence and coherence that characterize Japan’s security policy. Abe’s opposition to a No First Use (NFU) policy and Japan’s calibrated approach to the newly adopted nuclear weapon ban treaty are closely associated with Japanese ambivalence and coherence toward nuclear weapons and related security issues.

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Introduction

Despite its famous antinuclear weapon declaratory policy, “Three Non-Nuclear Principles,”¹ Japan has existed under the extended nuclear deterrent (nuclear umbrella) provided by the United States for more than 60 years. This bilateral nuclear arrangement has established a strong allied bond between the two nations, which Ota (2014) calls “the US–Japan Nuclear Alliance.” Against the backdrop of the recent nuclear crisis surrounding the Korean Peninsula, the current Japanese administration led by Prime Minister Shinzo

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¹“Three Non-Nuclear Principles” consists of these elements: not possessing, not producing, and not allowing any nation to bring a nuclear weapon into Japanese own territory including its territorial water. In December 1967, Prime Minister Eisaku Sato formally declared the principles for the first time. His elder brother, Nobusuke Kishi also indicated the same policy stance earlier as a Prime Minister. In the Japanese history, Sato is the only Japanese Nobel Peace laureate for his declaration of the principles and other peace-making agendas in the region.

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Abe has deepened its dependency on the US umbrella and solidified its cooperation with the US military.²

This historically unique politico-military alliance, backed by massive US nuclear forces, has created the “conceptual policy twist”³ that characterizes Japanese security policy related to nuclear weapons. This “conceptual policy twist” is a reflection of the Japanese response to the series of nuclear-related historical events following the final moment of World War II and can be analyzed in terms of two characteristic elements: “ambivalence and coherence.”

This twist is a result of several key factors, such as Japan’s unprecedented experience of nuclear humanitarian consequences, Japan’s prevailing antinuclear public sentiment, the Japanese security and foreign policy discourse delineated by the post-World War II and Cold War strategies of the US, and Tokyo’s gradual acceptance of the US nuclear umbrella, alongside its feverish efforts to solidify confidence in the credibility of US nuclear protection.

These important factors have forced a series of Japanese conservative governments, including the current Abe administration, to perform a sort of “*Nuclear Kabuki Play*” resulting from the ambivalence and coherence that shape Japan’s security policy. Abe’s recent opposition to the US adoption of a “no first use (NFU) policy,” which was seriously deliberated under the Barack Obama administration in 2016, and Japan’s calibrated approach to a newly adopted nuclear weapon ban treaty are closely associated with Japan’s ambivalence and coherence about nuclear weapons issues. This “*Nuclear Kabuki Play*” has had two major audiences: the United States and antinuclear domestic opinion in Japan.⁴

In this piece, the author will explain in-depth the historical background to Japan’s embrace of US nuclear weapon policy, symbolized by the nuclear umbrella. At the same time, the political process implemented by Japanese policy makers to manage and control widespread antinuclear public sentiment through a variety of political tools will be investigated. These include “nuclear secret deals” with the United States, Japanese collaboration with the US on the so-called “peaceful” use of nuclear energy, and Japan’s advocacy role in promoting nuclear disarmament on the international stage.

²On 22 August 2017, two F15s of the Japanese Self Defense Forces participated in a joint exercise with two B52s of the US Air Forces over Japan Sea, according to Japanese Defense Minister, Itsunori Onodera, who confirmed the conducted exercise at a press conference on 21 November 2017.

³The author uses the phrase “conceptual policy twist” in order to explain existence of a wide gap and discrepancy between Japanese policy elites and public. The policy elites tends to take a policy action in accordance with coherent policy discourse and trends stipulated by established nuclear architectures like the US–Japan security treaty and the US–Japan nuclear cooperation agreement. On the other hand, Japanese public tends to embrace a sort of ambivalence stipulated by their past experiences of nuclear-related events like a-bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Lucky Dragon incident in 1954. Policy elites understand complexity and sensitivity of this ambivalence shared by the public, and they try to demonstrate their sympathetic understanding to it, even though their policy judgments and decisions are twisted from prevailing public expectation.

⁴The author uses the word “Kabuki” to explain the unique situation that several Japanese governments had to face on nuclear policy issues. In the past, they periodically faced a predicament which was caused by a wide gap between their public announcement and the reality. A clear example is the bilateral secret deal which enables the US naval ship carrying nuclear weapons to visit Japanese ports contrary to the public announcement by the government of Japan that assured the citizens that it would never allow any state to do so. For details of the nuclear secret deal and public stance of the Japanese government, refer to Wampler (2009) who describes the unique situation past Japanese governments had to face as “Nuclear Noh Drama” rather than “Kabuki.”

In addition, this piece presents a quick overview of Japanese civil nuclear policy, which has added a different character to the “conceptual policy twist.” Over the past few decades, Japan has enjoyed a special status as the sole non-nuclear weapon state privileged to reprocess nuclear spent fuels taken from commercial nuclear reactors, based upon the US–Japan Nuclear Cooperative Agreement, which came into effect in 1988.⁵

Following the elaboration of these Japanese nuclear policy-making processes from an historical perspective, this piece will shed an analytical light on the “conceptual twist” of Japanese nuclear policy and examine future policy implications, although Japan’s “*Nuclear Kabuki Play*” is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Origin of nuclear projection into Japan

This section addresses the question “when did the United States start to provide its nuclear umbrella for Japan and its neighboring regions through the deployment of its most important strategic asset?” A plausible answer is that it was in autumn 1953, just a few months after the Korean War concluded, via the Armistice Agreement between United Nations forces led by the United States and DPRK–China allied coalition.

The US government dispatched its aircraft carrier battle group equipped with nuclear weapons to Japan for the first time in October 1953. The USS Oriskany was one of the first generation of US Navy carriers capable of a nuclear attack and visited Yokosuka, a major naval port-base nearby Tokyo, after completing a “special weapons” training mission on the US West Coast, according to the Oriskany’s log book.⁶

Inside the US military, “special weapons” is a metaphor for nuclear weapons. Therefore, the description in the log book means that the Oriskany was certified as a nuclear-mission-capable carrier through this training process before she navigated the Pacific Ocean for Japan.

In addition, there is additional hard evidence of Oriskany’s first nuclear mission and deployment to Japan.

Two key senior crew members of the Oriskany left important oral testimonies about a role and mission of her dispatch to Japan in October 1953. First, retired Admiral Charles D. Griffin, a captain of the Oriskany at the time of visiting Japan in 1953, implied that the carrier had a nuclear deterrent mission during an interview with the US Naval Institute in 1970, two years after his retirement.

Griffin said, “she (Oriskany) serves the United States as a fearsome deterrent to renewed hostilities during the high tensioned Korean truce. As part of this mobile striking force the influence is not only felt in Korean waters, but also in every part of the Far East where the threat of aggression exists.”⁷ He did not specifically mention Japan, but his comment suggests that Japan was under his consideration for protection through the US nuclear deterrent.

⁵The bilateral agreement has a 30-year time duration, which is to be expired in July 2018. After this deadline, the agreement will remain effective unless either party notifies other party of its intention to abrogate it.

⁶Log Books of the USS Oriskany, from 1 August to 31 August and from 1 September to 30 September 1953, National Archives in College Park (NACP). A copy of this archival material was provided to the author by a Japanese independent historian Shoji Niihara. The author would like to express the deepest gratitude and appreciation to him.

⁷*The Reminiscences of Admiral Charles Donald Griffin, U.S. Navy (Retired)*, Volume I, The US Naval Institute, Annapolis, Maryland, 1973, p.263. A copy of this archival material was provided to the author by Niihara.

Another senior official of the Oriskany left a crucial oral testimony with the US Naval Institute in 1985. Retired Rear Admiral James D. Ramage described the exact details of his Carrier Air Group 19's operation during the Oriskany's visit to Japan and deployment in the Sea of Japan later in 1953. The main points of his testimony are summarized below:⁸

- (1) The Carrier Air Group 19, with Ramage in charge, got 36 planes that can be configured and at least 40 pilots that are trained in nuclear weapons delivery.
- (2) One day, the Oriskany was deployed to the Sea of Japan and his air group was told to stand by for a nuclear strike on North Korea.
- (3) His air group had all the talent in nuclear knowledge and went along and weaponeered the whole strike, "maybe 10 or 12 nukes."

His precise descriptions of a nuclear attack exercise in the Sea of Japan indicates that the US military and its political leaders considered a nuclear air raid against North Korea and China as a realistic option in the future, even though it would only be a possibility if the ceasefire collapsed and expected ground battles resumed.

The explanations given by both Ramage and Griffin also clearly suggest that the US military tried to establish an operational capacity for nuclear attack against their Asian communist adversaries who assumed Japan as an enemy, and the Oriskany's first deployment to the region in October 1953 appeared to prove such a capacity which provided deterrent effects on the Korean Peninsula, as well as for Japan.

Deployment of tactical nukes in Asia

Dispatching the Oriskany to Yokosuka and Sasebo⁹ as an opening gambit, the US military began their systematic projection of nuclear power into East Asia through periodic naval nuclear transits and tried to establish an extended nuclear deterrent for its allies, mainly Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan, in the context of the intensification of the Cold War.

Besides the frequent transits of nuclear capacity carrier battle groups to Japan and the neighboring region,¹⁰ the government of Dwight D. Eisenhower initiated nuclear weapons deployment to the Okinawa Islands whose administration was controlled by US authorities still. In order to realize its centerpiece defense policy, "New Look" and "Massive Retaliation Strategy," the Eisenhower administration began to introduce nuclear weapons into its allies' territories from the mid-1950s.

This existential nuclear projection was intended to complement the operational capacity of vulnerable US and allied conventional forces both in Europe and in Asia, which could be devastated by the more robust and much larger Soviet conventional forces. The US military decided that the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons close to

⁸*The Reminiscences of Rear Admiral James D. Ramage, U.S. Navy (Retired)*, pp. 168–170, The US Naval Institute, Annapolis, Maryland, 1999, pp. 168–170. A copy of this archival material was provided to the author by Niihara. Also, the Ramage's accounts are complemented with his recollection in Ramage (1995).

⁹Sasebo is a key naval port city located in southern Kyushu region. Sasebo is just 30 km from Nagasaki.

¹⁰Such nuclear aircraft carriers as the USS Ticonderoga, the USS Constellation, and USS Independence visited Japan through 1960s to 1970s. These carriers were integrated into the US strategic nuclear war plan, Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) until 1976. See Miller (2001, 222–227).

potential military hotspots, like the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait Islands, and West Germany, was a strong necessity.

In these strategic circumstances, the US government initiated the overseas deployment of nuclear weapons, which began with Okinawa and West Germany at the end of 1954.¹¹ Both of these foreign territories were recognized as key bedrocks by US authorities who were eager to implement their Cold War strategy. The US military decided that their strategy should be supported by a clear threat, guaranteed by the existence of nuclear weapons in the region, in order to prevent Soviet and Chinese invasions against western interests.

From 1954 to 1972, when the US administration of Okinawa was returned to the Japanese authorities, US military forces installed 18 types of nuclear weapon systems in Okinawa, such as the 280 mm gun, the depth bomb, nuclear missiles like Mace and Falcon, and nuclear rockets like Honest John. The number of nuclear weapons totaled around 1300 at its peak in 1967. The US also introduced nuclear arsenals into South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Guam, in addition to Okinawa. The number of the US nuclear weapons deployed to the Asia Pacific region totaled more than 3200 at peak, which means Okinawa took the lion's share of the arsenals introduced (Norris, Arkin, and Burr, 2018).

At the same time as the physical nuclear projection was systemized through naval transits of nuclear warships and the forward deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in the region, in 1954, the US military proposed another draconian measure: a nuclear stockpile program to be installed on the Japanese mainland. However, this drastic proposal was flatly rejected by then US ambassador to Tokyo, John M. Allison, who emphasized his deep concern about the potentially severe political repercussions created by the growing antinuclear stance of the Japanese public, following the Lucky Dragon incident on 1 March 1954 (Ota, 2013, 48–60).¹²

By taking tangible measures, such as making nuclear transits into the Japanese mainland, and the nuclear installation in Okinawa by the US forces from mid-1950s until the end of the Cold War,¹³ Japan became embedded with strategic nuclear assets under the nuclear umbrella provided by its superior ally, the United States.

Strategic thinking of Japanese conservative elites

From the mid-1950s onwards, as the US military's nuclear projection into Japan and its neighboring region gradually intensified, a series of top political leaders in Japan embraced the developments due to their own strategic judgment, based upon their recognition of the security environment and their Cold War mentality.

In March 1955, when asked by foreign reporters about the acceptability of a potential US request to store nuclear weapons in Japan, Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama responded in a surprisingly positive tone. "If we justify 'peace through strength,' we

¹¹Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Atomic Energy), "History of the Custody and Deployment of Nuclear Weapons (U) July 1945 through September 1977," obtained by the Natural Resource Defense Council, Washington D.C., under the Freedom Information Act (hereafter cited as FOIA) request. See also Norris, Arkin, and Burr (2018).

¹²As the second best choice, the US military decided to deploy only non-nuclear components at the US bases in Japan instead of storing complete nuclear bombs.

¹³During the time of the reversion of Okinawa to Japan in May 1972, nuclear weapons deployed into Okinawa were withdrawn.

have to allow” the US military to store nuclear weapons in Japanese territories,” he said.¹⁴ At a Diet session later the same month, Hatoyama also made it clear that Japan would have to consider whether to allow US nuclear installations in the context of preventing a war and stabilizing peace.¹⁵

Hatoyama seemed to understand the strategic logic of the Eisenhower administration that promoted the vigorous overseas deployment of tactical atomic weapons to ensure the steady implementation of the “Massive Retaliation Strategy.” However, Hatoyama’s supportive comments on potential nuclear deployment in Japan caused a severe backlash from Japanese Socialists and Communists in the Diet, as well as the antinuclear public sentiment nationwide. They demanded that Hatoyama withdraw his previous comments on the possibility of future US nuclear installations in Japan.

Having faced these public pressures and outcries, finally Hatoyama was forced to withdraw his original generous position on potential nuclear installations by the US military. On March 29 that year, he made these statements below at an Upper House session;¹⁶

There is no necessity to store nuclear weapons in Japan, because the US military equips its naval vessels with nuclear weapons...without storing nuclear weapons on Japanese land, we can maintain peace through strength with the US possession of nuclear weapons, I believe.

This statement is a definite proof that Hatoyama and his government recognized the strategic importance of US nuclear transits to Japan and the neighboring region, which began with the Oriskany’s visit to Yokosuka in October 1953. He also recognized the strategic value of the nuclear umbrella provided by the US military.

His successors also supported the strategic value of the extended US nuclear deterrent. Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, who took power in 1957 and dedicated his political capital to revising the US–Japan Security Treaty in 1960, was also a strong supporter of the nuclear deterrent. He did not even try to hide his inclination to strengthen military cooperation between the two allies. Then US ambassador to Tokyo, Douglas MacArthur Jr. described Kishi’s solid belief in the power of the US nuclear deterrent below.¹⁷

In Kishi we have at last an able leader of Japan...He has acknowledged to me Japan’s dependence on the US nuclear deterrent to prevent general war. He shares our concept of mobile striking forces held in readiness against aggression.

Based on his strategic way of thinking and realistic view of regional security, Kishi became one of the key authors of the US–Japan “nuclear secret deal,” which excludes nuclear transit to Japan by US naval vessels from nuclear introduction. A prior consultation between Washington and Tokyo is required if the US wishes to introduce nuclear weapons into Japanese territories (Ota, 2013; Shinobu, 2014; Gaimusho Yushikisha Iinkai, 2010).

¹⁴“Nihon ni Genbaku Chozo Yamunashi [Inevitable to Store Atomic Bombs in Japan],” *Asahi Shinbun* (evening edition), 14 March 1955.

¹⁵Shugiin Honkaigi Gijiroku [Record of the Full House of Representative], 24 March 1955.

¹⁶Sangiin Yosaniinkai Gijiroku [Record of the Upper House Budget Committee], 29 March 1955.

¹⁷Letter from the Ambassador in Japan (MacArthur) to the Secretary of State, Tokyo, 25 May 1957 in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS): 1955–1957, Vol. XXIII, Part 1 Japan*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1991, 325–326.

Nuclear secret deal

The bilateral security treaty revised and ratified in 1960 by the Kishi and Eisenhower administrations established a new legal system called “prior consultation,” which requires the US authorities to make an advance consultation with their Japanese counterparts before introducing nuclear weapons into Japanese territories or initiating military combat operations against foreign enemy forces directly from US bases in Japan.

This new consultation arrangement was an appealing political symbol of “equalization” for each participating state of the revised treaty. Under the older security treaty, which came into effect in 1952, Japan did not have any right to intervene, object, or even express an opinion about US nuclear installations in Japan or US military combat operations launched directly from Japan. The discriminatory nature of the old treaty stimulated and amplified anti-military and anti-US base sentiments in Japan throughout the 1950s.

To ease domestic frustrations about this bilateral security arrangement, Kishi asked his US counterpart to adopt the new consultation arrangement, even though it did not stipulate a power of veto for Japan.

However, Kishi and his Foreign Minister Aiichiro Fujiyama acquiesced in the US interpretation of nuclear introduction which did not include nuclear transit by naval vessels. One of the key reasons for their acquiescence was related with strong pressure and opposition from the US Navy. The Navy was adamant that ongoing naval transit operations should not be affected or undermined by the newly established consultation mechanism and pressured US diplomatic negotiators to ensure that naval transit operations, including nuclear ones, remained intact, even after the new treaty was enforced.

After a series of under-the-table negotiations between the two governments, Fujiyama and MacArthur drafted and signed a confidential paper called the “Record of Discussion” on 6 January 1960. Sentence 2.c of the “Record of Discussion” stipulates below:¹⁸

“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...

The “Record of Discussion” signed by Fujiyama and agreed by Kishi creates a significant loophole in the prior consultation mechanism by excluding “present procedures” from the scope of the bilateral consultation process, such as the US naval nuclear transit that began in 1953. Kishi’s clear recognition of Japanese dependency on the US nuclear umbrella, and his devotion to maintaining the arrangement, led him and Fujiyama to offer their tacit approval for continuing US nuclear transits to Japan, through the secret deal stipulated by the “Record of Discussion.”

¹⁸“Record of Discussion (copy),” confidential, Tokyo, 6 January 1960, declassified by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For analysis and interpretation of “Record of Discussion,” see linkai (2010: Chapter 2), Ota (2013, 119–127), and Shinobu (2014, 68–98).

In addition, the nuclear secret deal enabled Kishi and his successors to evade public scrutiny of the hard reality of US nuclear transits to Japanese naval ports, such as Yokosuka and Sasebo, by the US Navy. Thanks to this bilateral deal, the Japanese government was able to explain to its own citizens and Diet members that they could assume these naval vessels carry no nuclear weapons, as the US government had never asked for a prior consultation with Japan.

As a series of Japanese cabinet ministers explained to their constituents, it was true that a prior consultation had never been initiated by either side.¹⁹ However, the absence of consultation does not indicate an absence of nuclear weapons on the US naval vessels visiting Japanese ports. The 50-year-long absence of consultation was a consequence of the secret nuclear deal, which stipulated that the US government need not consult with Japan when its navy sends vessels equipped with nuclear weapons to Japan.

Without any consultation ever going to take place, due to the premise that nuclear transit was out of the scope of prior consultation, both governments enjoyed benefits. For the Japanese side, it was able to evade an inconvenient truth of the US nuclear transits which most Japanese citizens strongly objected to, by flatly denying their claims. Japanese conservative politicians and security policy bureaucrats could make a statement such as, “if no prior consultation has been initiated by the United States, there is no nuclear introduction being proposed, including nuclear transit.”

For the US side, its military could sustain nuclear transit operations to East Asia, which originated in the USS *Oriskany*'s visit to Japan in 1953, by taking advantage of the secret nuclear deal. At the end of the Cold War, the then President George H.W. Bush decided to equip no longer military surface ships and attack submarines with nuclear weapons. Due to this epoch-making decision, called the “Presidential Nuclear Initiative,” the US military authorities currently operate only the strategic submarines called SSBNs equipped with nuclear warheads, which never visit Japan.

Seeking US nuclear commitment to defend Japan

Prime Minister Eisaku Sato, who took power in 1964, was another stalwart supporter of US nuclear deterrent forces, just like his elder brother, Nobusuke Kishi. Sato was elected as the prime minister of Japan just a few weeks after Communist China succeeded in conducting its first nuclear explosion, in October 1964, as the same time as the Tokyo Olympic Games were taking place. This nuclear turnaround in East Asia continued to haunt Sato himself, who considered China to be the number-one enemy of Japan.²⁰

Overshadowed by the Chinese military threat demonstrated by a series of nuclear tests in the 1960s, Sato was persistent in seeking an unequivocal US security commitment to defend Japan at the time of a Chinese attack against Japan, through either conventional or nuclear forces.

¹⁹During the National Diet session on 1 July 2009, then Japanese Foreign Minister Hirofumi Nakasone confirmed that the government of the US had never proposed a prior consultation to Japan. Since then, there has been no announcement or report about conducting a prior consultation until today. For Nakasone's testimony on the Diet, see Shugiin Gaimuinkai Gijiroku [Record of the House of Representative Foreign Affairs Committee], 1 July 2009.

²⁰As a symbolic distrustful gesture toward China, Sato described the Communist China armed with nuclear weapons as “a madman with a knife” when he met US Secretary of State Dean Rusk in December 1966; refer to Cable 4196 from Embassy Tokyo to Secretary of State, 6 December 1966, Secret, National Security Files, Country File Japan, Box 251, Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) Library. Also see Kusunoki (2008, 30).

In January 1965, for the first time as Japanese Prime Minister, Sato visited Washington and asked his counterparts to assure Japan of the US nuclear-deterrent commitment to defend Japan. During a meeting with US Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara on 13 January, Sato made the following statement:²¹

I received a briefing about nature of the Chinese nuclear explosion (from Central Intelligence Agency) last night. Japan is adamantly against possession and use of nuclear weapons. Even though it is not impossible for Japan to produce nuclear weapons, we will not take the same position as (French President Charles) de Gaulle. Also please be careful about any comment on nuclear introduction, because the matter is stipulated by the US–Japan security treaty. However, in the case of a war, the situation would be totally different. We expect the United States to take an immediate retaliation by using nuclear weapons. In this scenario, it is not easy to build a facility for nuclear weapons on Japanese shore. But I think you can immediately launch ones stationed at sea.

Later in 1974, Sato was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his famous declaration of “Three Non-Nuclear Principles” and other diplomatic efforts to stabilize the region. During the meeting with McNamara, Sato made it clear that Japan would never develop nuclear weapons by itself as a matter of principle. At the same moment however, a later Nobel Peace Laureate urged the US government to use its nuclear weapons at the time of extreme security breaches in Japan.

Interestingly, Sato warned McNamara about the subtle differences between nuclear deployment on Japanese land and stationing nuclear weapons on US naval vessels navigating Japanese territorial or neighboring waters. The former option was automatically subjected to bilateral prior consultation regulated by the US–Japan mutual security treaty. However, the latter option was not covered by the prior consultation clause of the treaty; therefore, the US Navy could launch a nuclear attack through its nuclear-equipped carriers, attack submarines, and surface ships, without any formal discussion with the Japanese.

Such an unambiguous statement from Sato to McNamara on the potential use of nuclear weapons from naval platforms could be understood as the Japanese government’s advance consent to the future use of US nuclear weapons, in the case of a dire security situation for Japan. On the other hand, he was quite cautious and even negative about the possible deployment of nuclear weapons on the Japanese mainland, because he expected an intense uproar from the antinuclear public in Japan, should he and the US authorities agree to nuclear installations on shore.

Securing US nuclear guarantee

Sato also made a crucial request twice in front of President Lyndon B. Johnson to secure the protection of Japan through US nuclear arsenals, at the summit meetings in January 1965 and November 1967, both held in Washington D.C.

According to a Japanese declassified record of the discussion, on 12 January 1965, Sato asked Johnson directly to defend Japan “through the same manner as by conventional forces, when it is attacked by nuclear weapons.” Responding to Sato’s frank request,

²¹Sato Sori, McNamara Chokan Kaidan [Record of Discussion between Prime Minister Sato and Secretary McNamara], 13 January 1965, File No.7, Sato Sori Hobei Kankei [Materials related to Prime Minister Sato’s visit to the United States], 0120-2001-01416 (A’152-12-02), declassified by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2008.

Johnson expressed his understanding of the vulnerability of the Japanese position and accepted Sato's request for a US contingency response. In addition, Johnson was an ardent advocator of non-nuclear proliferation and did not forget to emphasize that the United States did not support "increasing the number of nuclear weapon states."²²

A US declassified record of this summit meeting elaborates the contents of the two leaders' conversation, written down on the Japanese record. Furthermore, the US version reveals that Johnson himself used a strategically important term, "nuclear deterrent."²³

As far as the author can confirm, this was the first time the US president gave his Japanese counterpart such an unequivocal assurance of an extended nuclear deterrent in defense of Japan. Johnson's remark on the nuclear umbrella commitment satisfied Sato who wrote down in his diary the following words:

Just being straightforward into the meeting, (President Johnson) clearly said that the US would never withdraw from Vietnam and that Japan would not have to be worried about (credibility of) the US commitment to defend Japan. All discussions went so well. (Sato, 1998, 222–223)

Two years and 10 months later, Sato met Johnson again at the White House. For Japan, the main purpose of the meeting held on 15 November 1967 was to agree on the reversion of Okinawa's US administration to Japan "within a few years."²⁴ During the meeting, Sato also asked Johnson to reconfirm his nuclear deterrent pledge made in 1965 and succeeded, thanks to the president's positive attitude.

At this meeting, Sato employed maverick tactics to persuade Johnson to repeat a similar or stronger pledge to defend Japan under the US nuclear umbrella. According to a Japanese record, he said to Johnson the following:²⁵

When I was honored to see his Imperial Majesty before I visited the United States, his Majesty expressed a concern about Japanese security. At my last visit to the US, President made a pledge to protect Japan from any attack. Considering China has developed nuclear weapons since then, I would like to expect that the same commitment you made last time will be applicable for any nuclear attack against our nation.

It is quite unusual for the Japanese prime minister to refer to discussions with the Emperor, for his comments should not be used for any political purpose according to the current Japanese Constitution. However, Sato was so eager and ardent to resecure Johnson's nuclear commitment to defend Japan that this unorthodox diplomatic approach was taken behind the closed-door meeting between the two leaders.²⁶

²²"Daiikikai Johnson Daitoryo, Sato Shusho Kaidan Yoshi [Digests of the First Meeting between President Johnson and Prime Minister Sato]," 12 January 1965, declassified by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2002.

²³Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, "Current US–Japanese and World Problems," 12 January 1965, Office of the President, The White House Time: 11:30, Secret, National Security Files, Country File Japan, Box 253-1, LBJ Library.

²⁴For details of background of the US–Japan summit meeting in November 1967, see Wakaizumi (1994). Wakaizumi was Sato's secret envoy to make a deal with the White House at the both meeting in 1967 and 1969, especially focusing on the reversion of Okinawa.

²⁵"Sato Sori, Johnson Daitoryo Kaidan Kiroku Dainikai Kaidan [The Record of Discussion of the Second Meeting]," enclosed in Kusuda (2000, 766–767). Kusuda, a closest aide to Sato, possessed Sato's official meeting records with a series of US President on his own and revealed them in the published diary.

²⁶The part of Sato's usage of the Emperor comments was deducted from the official declassified Japanese record of this meeting.

Reinforcing the declaration made in the 1965 meeting, President Johnson responded positively and favorably to Sato's request for the reaffirmation of Japan's protection under the nuclear umbrella. "The commitment has already existed between two of us ... as long as I am President, I will live up to our promise. I appreciate Prime Minister's frank revelation of opinion. I always have security of the world in mind, so do I regarding the security of Japan," Johnson said (Kusuda, 2000, 766–767).²⁷

Under Sato's political reign from mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, there were at least three secret studies commissioned by government officials about whether Japan should or could go nuclear independently. These studies were a reflection of the unsettling sentiments shared by the Japanese security-policy elite, who were shocked by Chinese nuclear tests and weapons development.

However, all of these studies concluded that there is no strong political case for Japan to have its own nuclear weapons for several reasons, such as the high financial cost of an indigenous program; the political backlash that would be caused by Japanese domestic opinion rooted in its historical experiences in Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the expected negative reaction of the United States, China, and the Soviet Union; and Japanese geological limitations, which make conducting nuclear tests almost impossible (Sugita, 2005, 67–79, Kusunoki, 2008, 36, and Ota, 2013, 242–248).

While the negative factors identified presented obstacles to the development of an indigenous nuclear program, the US guarantee to protect Japan under their nuclear umbrella was the most persuasive reason for Japanese political leaders to refrain from developing an indigenous nuclear program. One former official deeply involved in one of these studies said to the author below:²⁸

Finally, we got convinced that Japan does not need to possess its own nuclear weapons even though enemies have ones. For it would be fine with Japan to stay under the US nuclear umbrella. This is a conclusion (of the secret study).

Four nuclear policies and hidden nuclear option

After securing the US commitment to the extended nuclear deterrent, the Sato administration decided to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1970. Before joining the NPT, Sato declared the "Four Nuclear Policies." It consisted of the elements below:²⁹

- (1) Three Non-Nuclear Principles – not possessing, not producing, and not allowing any nation to bring nuclear weapons into Japanese territory including territorial waters.

²⁷Also refer to "Memorandum of Conversation, 'US–Japanese Relations and Security Problems,'" 15 November 1967, Secret, NSF Country File Japan, Box 295, LBJ Library.

²⁸The author's interview with Minro Shigaki on 10 April 2014. Shigaki, a former senior official of Cabinet Secretariat, was in charge of one of the secret studies, which started in 1967 and concluded in 1970. This study involved several top Japanese scholars and was directly financed by the Sato cabinet. Mr Shigaki wrote down rough details about activities of this study group on his diary. The author was given a chance to scrutinize his diary. The other secret studies were led by civil defense officials of the Japanese government.

²⁹For the background of making the "Four Nuclear Policies," see Wakaizumi (1994, 140–141), Kusuda (2000, 890), and Kurosaki (2006, 187–216). Also see Minoru Kusuda Oral History Interview, conducted by Akihiko Tanaka and Murata Koji, 16 November 1995, the National Security Archives, US–Japan Project Oral History Program.

- (2) Focusing on feasible nuclear disarmament while pursuing the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons.
- (3) Continuing to rely on the US nuclear umbrella.
- (4) Making the best effort to promote the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Each of these elements has been sustained continuously since the treaty was enforced, while some of them have progressed more than others have. However, the development of these four elements has been entangled with each other in a complex manner and characterized the unique nature of Japanese nuclear policy discourse.

For example, Japanese nuclear energy policy, especially, its nuclear fuel-cycle policy, has been walking a fine line for the past 50 years, due to its interaction with other elements. In 1969, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs drafted a confidential policy-guideline paper titled “Wagakuni no Gaiko Seisaku no Taiko (The General Principles of Foreign Policy of Japan).” The paper was finalized based on a series of internal discussions, some of which were attended by then Foreign Minister Kiichi Aichi, one of the closet aides to Prime Minister Sato.

The policy-guideline says:

Japan will take a policy not to possess nuclear weapons for a while, but maintain an economic and technical potentials for nuclear weapon production and pay attention to not being restricted from doing so (by others). (Gaimusho Gaiko Seisaku Kikaku Inkai [Foreign Policy Planning Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs], 1969, 67–68)³⁰

Since the mid-1950s, Japan has pursued its own nuclear fuel-cycle system through imports from France, and the development of its own technology, which could be used for a weapons-based program. In 1988, when the US–Japan Nuclear Cooperation Agreement called the US–Japan “123 Agreement” was revised, the Ronald Regan administration decided to provide Japan with comprehensive advance consent to reprocess nuclear fuels manufactured in the US or removed from US-designed nuclear reactors.

The US–Japan “123 Agreement” has 30-year duration until it expires in July 2018. It was the first time the United States allowed one single non-nuclear weapons state to conduct commercial reprocessing activities in such a comprehensive and generous manner.

By following the policy to promote its own independent fuel-cycle, Japanese diplomats did envision developing the technical proficiency necessary to develop a nuclear weapons program and considered this technological option as a hidden element leading to its own deterrent capability, as the foreign policy guideline paper in 1969 suggests.

This ambivalent policy course, advocating nuclear disarmament as a big supporter of NPT on the one hand and maintaining a nuclear potential option on the other, seems to have continued to the present day. One close foreign policy aide to Prime Minister Abe told the author in 2014 that:

(Quite recently) I explained (to a well-placed senior official of the US government) that the nuclear fuel cycle is the utmost and vital interest for Japan. Facing (militarily) rising China, Japan needs it, I said to him. Of course, Japan will never produce a nuclear weapon, but possessing the capability to do so is very important in terms of relationship with China and North Korea... We can never give up the comprehensive advance-consent given by the US.³¹

³⁰Also refer to Sugita (2005, 75–76) and Kurosaki (2006, 278).

³¹The author’s interview with a senior official of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 11 June 2014.

Based on the author's series of interviews with multiple Japanese governmental sources over the past 6 years, it can be said that the above comment reflects the Abe administration security policy elite's common view of the peaceful use of nuclear power, especially the Japanese independent nuclear fuel cycle.

However, a gigantic unresolved problem remains, caused by the Japanese independent fuel-cycle, which is a major policy-consequence of "the US–Japan Nuclear Alliance" backed by the "123 Agreement." This has resulted in the accumulation of around 47 tons of separated plutonium currently stored in Japan and overseas and the lack of a concrete or feasible plan to consume these nuclear materials in a tangible manner (Japan Atomic Energy Commission, 2017).³²

Conclusion – Umbrella stipulating policy discourse

"The US–Japan Nuclear Alliance" is a bilateral policy architecture built around the common strategic objectives of nuclear policy areas with both military and commercial dimensions. The policy has several ramifications that contradict traditional Japanese national identity widely shared by the general public, which is characterized by strong advocacy for the total elimination of nuclear weapons and antinuclear public sentiment based on the unprecedented humanitarian catastrophes in Hiroshima and Nagasaki 73 years ago. These ramifications, which are detailed below, are an insightful indicator of the "conceptual policy twist" shaped by Japanese "ambivalence and coherence" on nuclear issues.

One typical ramification was the Abe administration's recent 2017 decision not to participate in a multilateral negotiation process for adopting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the so-called nuclear ban treaty, despite broad public support for Japanese involvement in the negotiation process.³³

According to the author's interviews with around 10 policy makers of the Japanese government from the end of 2016 to summer in 2017, the Abe administration decided that the treaty would undermine the current security environment surrounding Japan, as North Korea accelerated its nuclear and missile development program and has never expressed any intention to reverse the expansion of its nuclear arsenal until quite recently.³⁴

Several Japanese governmental officials also explained that one of the main reasons given for not participating in the treaty negotiations was the serious deep division between nuclear weapon states opposing the treaty and the non-nuclear weapon states supporting it. However, the most fundamental reason Tokyo continues to reject the nuclear weapons ban treaty is their sanctioning of the nuclear umbrella provided by the United States.

Just before the treaty negotiations started in the United Nation's Headquarters in New York in March 2017, one senior official belonging to the National Security Secretariat of the Prime Minister's Office told the author:

³²According to the Japan Atomic Energy Commission's data, 9.8 ton of separated plutonium is stored in Japan out of 46.9 ton. Other 20.8 ton is stored in the United Kingdom and 16.2 ton in France. For details, refer to Japan Atomic Energy Commission (2017).

³³According to a public opinion poll conducted by the Kyodo News in November 2016, 71.1% said Japan should participate in the treaty negotiation. See Tsuchiya (2016).

³⁴All these interviews were conducted under the background condition.

North Korea has a big impact on (our decision making on the ban treaty), because it has been launching missiles so frequently. (With respect to potential Japanese participation in the negotiation,) there have been different opinions inside the Japanese government. Some have argued that it still may be possible for Japan to participate in the treaty negotiation. But, others said that Japan would be accused of deceiving the US by the (Donald) Trump administration, if Japan decides to participate. If this is the case, the Japan-US relationship would be hurt in the long run.³⁵

Why did Japanese officials think, “Japan would be accused of deceiving the US”? The reason is closely related with the Joint Statement announced by President Trump and Prime Minister Abe in February 2017, in which Trump reassured Abe of the US-extended nuclear deterrent in an unambiguous manner. “The US commitment to defend Japan through the full range of US military capabilities, both nuclear and conventional, is unwavering,” the Joint Statement says.³⁶

A sort of clear “coherence” can be observed in this policy decision by the Abe administration. Abe and his security policy elite must have expected a strong backlash from Japanese antinuclear public on their decision not to participate in the ban treaty negotiations. However, they made an unambiguous judgment that the bilateral security relationship with the US, a sole guarantor of the nuclear umbrella for Japan, should be prioritized over participation in the treaty negotiations. The option of participation is the preference of the Japanese antinuclear constituencies, who want to see their government maintain traditional non-nuclear policy principles based upon their national experiences during the final moments of World War II, while also express “ambivalence” about the necessity to strengthen national security through the US nuclear umbrella.

The Abe administration understood the sensitivity of this “ambivalence” shared by the public. Therefore, Abe and then Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida made a decision to perform a “*Nuclear Kabuki Play*.” On 27 March 2017, an official Japanese delegation was sent to the U.N. Headquarters in New York to participate in the opening ceremony of the ban treaty negotiations, despite the delegation having expressed its opposition to the treaty. However, this participation enabled the Japanese government to placate its domestic audience, even though in a limited effect, by demonstrating their best efforts through their presence at the initial stage of the negotiations at the U.N.³⁷

Another ramification of “the US–Japan Nuclear Alliance” was the thoroughly negative response of the Abe administration security policy elite to the US proposal to adopt a nuclear NFU policy, under the Barack Obama administration in 2016. After President Obama made a historical visit to Hiroshima as a first sitting US president on 27 May the same year, his administration accelerated a comprehensive policy review to implement several nuclear agendas, which had been advocated originally by President Obama in Prague, on 5 April 2009.³⁸

³⁵The author’s interview with a senior official of the National Security Secretariat on 8 March 2017.

³⁶Joint Statement by the Governments of the United States and Japan, 10 February 2017. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000227768.pdf> (Accessed on 14 November 2017).

³⁷For a detailed explanation by the Japanese delegation for their opposition to the ban treaty negotiation, refer to “Statement by H.E. Mr. Nobushige TAKAMIZAWA, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Representative of Japan to the Conference on Disarmament at the High-level Segment of the United Nations conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination (27 March 2017, New York).” <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000243024.pdf> (Accessed on 14 November 2017).

³⁸For details of Obama’s last minutes nuclear policy review and Japanese negative reaction, see Ota (2017).

One of the items Obama and his nuclear policy staff focused on was NFU. Once the US media reported that for the first time in US history, the Obama administration was seriously considering an NFU policy (Rogin, 2016), several senior Japanese officials revealed to the author their strong opposition or deep concern about a potential change in the US nuclear declaratory policy to NFU. Tokyo's negative reaction was reported back to Washington, alongside other cautious responses from several US allies and Congressional members. The Obama administration henceforth averted any major nuclear policy change.

This episode suggests the strong “coherence” of Japanese policy elites with a long-term security policy premised on US unequivocal political will to continue to provide a nuclear deterrent in the region. Eventually, this may prevent a major US policy transformation that departs from the overdue status quo that has endured since the beginning of the Cold War.

It can also be concluded that the strong “coherence” of Japanese elites with a robust and maybe excessive position on maintaining the nuclear deterrent outweighs the “ambivalence” shared by the Obama administration and Japanese public. The latter want to see a healthy and delicate balance between a few important elements, including reducing the role of nuclear weapons in national security policy, strengthening the trend toward nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, and sustaining regional security. This is a clear example of “conceptual policy twist” exemplified by “the US–Japan Nuclear Alliance.”

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