

# An Argument for Proliferation: Why the International Community Should Encourage Japan to Acquire Nuclear Weapons

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## *Abstract*

Japan faces a difficult geopolitical situation in light of heightening tensions on the Korean peninsula. Faced with the imminent danger of several volatile nuclear states at its doorstep, prevailing public attitudes to nuclear weapons rooted in unique historical conditions constrain Japanese policy makers from developing credible tools of deterrence. This article argues that Japan should abandon its three non-nuclear principles from 1967 and acquire a limited set of nuclear weapons for defensive purposes. As will be demonstrated, this fundamental change in Japan's national security policy appears likely to strengthen regional peace and stability.

**Keywords:** Japan, nuclear deterrence, North Korea, Asia-Pacific, realism, nuclear peace

## *Introduction*

Considering a complicated history with nuclear weapons that commands no lengthy explanation, such weapons have largely been considered undesirable in Japan. Yet Japan remains one of the world's most technologically advanced nations, possesses one of the world's largest plutonium reserves, and has one of the highest nuclear energy outputs globally. Such factors have led to Japan being described as a *de facto* nuclear state.<sup>1</sup> Through its civilian nuclear energy programme, Japan has since the 1960s acquired large quantities of plutonium, which combined with high technological capacities enables the state to assemble nuclear weapons within a year, if necessary.<sup>2</sup> Since the 2011 Fukushima disaster, nuclear energy suffered a significant setback and industry targets to generate 40 % of national energy were scaled back. Nevertheless, due to a lack of other energy sources and a heavy reliance on imports, Japan is likely to maintain its position as a strong nuclear energy state.<sup>3</sup> The Fukushima disaster helped generate further backlash and scepticism to nuclear energy, adding to the already negative public attitudes to nuclear technology.<sup>4</sup> Coupled with the backdrop of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Fukushima disaster has been essential in ensuring comparatively negative Japanese attitudes to nuclear technology. Interestingly, deaths caused by closed

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Large, "The Actual and Potential Development of Nuclear Weapons Technology in the Area of North East Asia (Korean Peninsula and Japan)", *Large Associates*, November 2016, <http://largeassociates.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/R3126-A1-final.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Akira Kurosaki, "Nuclear energy and nuclear-weapon potential: A historical analysis of Japan in the 1960s", *The Nonproliferation Review* 24, no. 1-2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2017.1367536>

<sup>3</sup> Harrison Jacobs, "The 17 Countries Generating The Most Nuclear Power", *Business Insider*, 6 April 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/countries-generating-the-most-nuclear-energy-2014-3?r=US&IR=T>

<sup>4</sup> Atsuko Kitada, "Public opinion changes after the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident to nuclear power generation as seen in continuous polls over the past 30 years", *Journal of Nuclear Science and Technology* 53, no. 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223131.2016.1175391>

nuclear reactors in the aftermath of Fukushima due to increased heat and electricity prices in Japan far outnumbered the deaths caused by the disaster itself, numbering at around 4,500 excess deaths between 2011 and 2014.<sup>5</sup>

While public attitudes to nuclear energy have been reluctant, attitudes towards nuclear weapons are far more averse. However, Japan neighbours North Korea, China, and Russia, three states armed with nuclear weapons and characterized by their assertive international behaviour. This paper argues a case that might seem unconventional and improbable at first glance. Based on the region's developing security situation in light of recent nuclear escalation by North Korea, this article contends it is in the national and strategic interest of Japan to acquire nuclear weapons for purposes of possessing a credible tool of deterrence in this hostile environment.

### ***Structure: Four Main Aspects to Consider Concerning Japanese Nuclear Armament***

Four aspects are imperative to consider in the question of whether Japan should acquire nuclear weapons. First, this article introduces and examines the historic and contemporary attitudes of Japanese government officials and the public concerning nuclear armament in order to better gain an understanding of current policies. Thereafter, the paper introduces nuclear deterrence theory and analyses its applicability in the Japanese geopolitical context. Thirdly, this article considers the scope of the North Korean nuclear arsenal and makes predictions regarding its future. The final section examines the reliability of existing US protection in a time when the global superpower is experiencing domestic political turbulence spilling over into its foreign policy priorities. Based on analysis of these four aspects, this article concludes it is in the national interest of Japan to acquire a limited set of nuclear weapons for defensive purposes in order to credibly deter aggression from neighbouring states.

### ***Contextualizing Japanese society and prevailing attitudes to nuclear weapons***

Article 9 of the Japanese constitution states the following: *'Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.'*<sup>6</sup>

Article 9 and the 'three non-nuclear principles' of 1967 (not possessing, not producing, and not allowing foreign nuclear weapons on Japanese territory), are the two guiding pillars of Japanese defence policy.<sup>7</sup> Before embarking on further arguments, it is worth emphasising the conundrum of allowing documents and principles, from 75 and 53 years ago respectively, to guide contemporary foreign policy. These principles originate from a time when only a handful nuclear states existed, devised in the aftermath of a devastating world war. Although certainly

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Neidell, Shinsuke Uchida, & Marcella Veronesi (2019) "Be Cautious with the Precautionary Principle: Evidence from Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Accident", *IZA Institute of Labor Economics Working Papers*, <http://ftp.iza.org/dp12687.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Constitution of Japan, 3 November 1946, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b4ee38.html>

<sup>7</sup> Masakatsu Ota, "Conceptual Twist of Japanese Nuclear Policy: Its Ambivalence and Coherence Under the US Umbrella," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 1 (2018): 93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1459286>

captivating and historically important, they should not be assigned the role of flawless lodestars in a dynamic, modern world, no matter how admirable and pacifist their intentions.

Public polling from recent years shows nearly half of Japan’s population oppose even remaining under the protection of the US nuclear umbrella, considering such protection unnecessary. Furthermore, nearly 80 % of the population remain opposed to the state acquiring its own nuclear weapons.<sup>8</sup> Anti-nuclear sentiments in the Japanese public are seemingly unshakeable. The significant imprint left on the population by atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing more than 210,000 people and leaving long-term consequences on public health and wellbeing, has understandably created strong anti-nuclear feelings. However, there was another less known incident in 1954 which arguably further shaped the Japanese view of nuclear weapons. The first US hydrogen bomb test in the South Pacific accidentally contaminated a Japanese fishing boat, giving every crew member severe radiation sickness and killing one. It was only after this peace time incident that the first grassroots movements against nuclear weapons emerged.<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to public sentiment, opinions favouring acquisition of nuclear weapons have on multiple occasions been voiced by Japanese political leaders. In the 1960s, Prime Minister Eisaku Sato commissioned several studies into acquiring atomic bombs and even told US President Lyndon B. Johnson that ‘Japanese public opinion will not permit this at present, but I believe that the public, especially the younger generation, can be educated’ into allowing nuclear armament.<sup>10</sup> Japan’s Prime Minister from 1982 to 1987, Yasuhiro Nakahone, also believed Japan should build its own nuclear weapons arsenal.<sup>11</sup> In 2016, then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe publicly insisted that Article 9 in the constitution does not prohibit Japan from obtaining nuclear weapons.<sup>12</sup> Considering this development, the central argument of this article extends into a political debate in post-war Japan regarding whether the state should operate in a more assertive manner on the international stage. In particular, this article is contextualized by recent unsuccessful attempts by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to revise Article 9 in the Japanese constitution.<sup>13</sup> As part of the ‘Abe doctrine’, Japan has seen signs of a return to more traditional state behaviour, where military and economic power are being sought to be used more actively in order to obtain state objectives.<sup>14</sup>

Considering these assertions by political leaders and how they diverge from public sentiments, it is essential to keep in mind that what the Japanese government wants is not always equal to what the general population wants. This divide was recently demonstrated by the government seeking closer integration under the US nuclear umbrella, going against public

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<sup>8</sup> Mike Mochizuki, “Three reasons why Japan will likely continue to reject nuclear weapons”, *Washington Post*, 6 November 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/11/06/japan-is-likely-to-retain-its-non-nuclear-principles-heres-why/>

<sup>9</sup> Mataka Kamiya, “Nuclear Japan: Oxymoron or coming soon?” *Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2002): 63-64, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016366003761036490>

<sup>10</sup> Kurt M. Campbell and Tsuyoshi Sunohara, “Japan: Thinking the Unthinkable”, in *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices*, ed. Kurt M. Campbell, Mitchell Reiss and Robert J. Einhorn (Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 222.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Harvey, *The Undeclared: The Rise, Fall and Rise of Modern Japan* (London: Pan MacMillan, 1994), 363.

<sup>12</sup> Jullian Ryall, “Shinzo Abe’s government insists Japanese constitution does not explicitly prohibit nuclear weapons”, *South China Morning Post*, 4 April 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/1933540/shinzo-abes-government-insists-japanese-constitution-does-not>

<sup>13</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, Alessio Patalano & Robert Ward, “Japan’s Grand Strategy: The Abe Era and Its Aftermath”, *Survival* 63, No. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1881258>

<sup>14</sup> Hughes et al, *Japan’s Grand Strategy*: 126-127.

opinion.<sup>15</sup> There are further indications that Japanese elites hold divergent views on security implications of nuclear weapons compared to the public. A 2001 survey targeting 2,000 ordinary Japanese citizens and 400 citizens who were considered to be exceptionally well-informed, found that over twice as many of the well-informed citizens wished for Japan to acquire atomic bombs.<sup>16</sup> Such an argument of authority is of course not worth much by itself, but its implications are still worth considering. Some have explained this divergence in opinion by pointing to the elite’s likelihood to form their opinions ‘in accordance with coherent policy discourse and trends stipulated by established nuclear architecture’, whereas the public ‘tends to embrace a sort of ambivalence stipulated by their past experiences’.<sup>17</sup>

In this article, I suggest diverting from the traditional notion of the Japanese public comparatively knowing better how devastating nuclear weapons can be, based on the experiences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Instead, this article contends that these historic events have generated uniquely distorted perspectives that are largely incoherent with contemporary scholarship considering security implications of nuclear weapons proliferation. In turn, Japanese defence strategy suffers from logical incoherence and renunciation of sovereignty, complicating the implementation of sound strategic defence policies in the post-war era.

### ***Nuclear Deterrence in the Japanese Geopolitical Context***

‘Deterrence is the practice of discouraging or restraining someone - in world politics, usually a nation-state - from taking unwanted actions, such as an armed attack.’<sup>18</sup> Nuclear deterrence adds to this definition by suggesting that an enemy’s attack will be met with a nuclear counterattack, thereby increasing a threat’s gravity and the potency of deterrence. In order to obtain stable deterrence, a state needs to have in place second-strike capabilities, meaning that an enemy would assume it to be capable of retaliating by nuclear attack any first strike on its territory. In order to have credible second-strike capacities, nuclear weapons need to be located in a diversified and ideally secretive set of locations, thus capable of producing an instant response to a first strike. Such widespread deterrence capacities are what generated the philosophy of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) during the Cold War, often credited with having ensured that the US and USSR never engaged in total warfare,<sup>19</sup> although whether or not nuclear weapons increase global security has been subject to longstanding and contentious debate.<sup>20 21</sup> Proponents of the idea that nuclear weapons sustain geopolitical stability advocate for a theory known as *Nuclear Peace*.

Renowned US strategist and classic thinker in the field of nuclear deterrence Bernard Brodie wrote upon the emergence of nuclear weapons in the US weapons arsenal that ‘Thus

<sup>15</sup> Ota, Japanese Nuclear Policy, 193-194.

<sup>16</sup> National Institute for Research Advancement, “Japan's Proactive Peace and Security Strategies - Including the Question of "Nuclear Umbrella"”, Report No. 20000005, 270, <https://www.nira.or.jp/past/publ/houko/i20000005.html>

<sup>17</sup> Ota, Japanese Nuclear Policy, 194.

<sup>18</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, “Understanding Deterrence”, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE295.html>

<sup>19</sup> E. Fox and S. Orman, “Do We Still Live in a MAD World?” The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies 30, no. 2 (2005): 132, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/216802815/D1A3E939B5DB4067PQ/1?accountid=10673>

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Waltz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May be Better”, *Adelphi Papers* 21, no. 171 (May 1981): <https://doi.org/10.1080/05679328108457394>

<sup>21</sup> Scott D. Sagan, “The Perils of Proliferation: Organization Theory, Deterrence Theory, and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons”, *International Security* 18, no. 4 (1994): 66-107, <https://web.stanford.edu/class/polisci243b/readings/sagan.pdf>

far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.’<sup>22</sup> Contextualizing his statement, since the development of nuclear weapons, states’ prospects of winning wars against a heavily armed nuclear state has effectively been eliminated. As a result, no rational state would launch a significant attack on a state that possesses nuclear weapons. Pursuing this line of thought, there is a strong, yet counterintuitive, case to be made that no other invention than nuclear weapons have been more instrumental for peace in the history of mankind. Notwithstanding the constant threat of total annihilation of humanity, the time of nuclear weapons represents a unique time in history as a rare occurrence of relative world peace between great powers. Consider the example of the Second World War: had Germany known that their opponents by the end of the war would develop a weapon that could destroy entire cities instantly, would they still have instigated offensive warfare?<sup>23</sup> *Mutatis mutandis* the same logic applies to China and Japan in 1936, or Iraq and Iran in 1980, and war would have seemed an unlikely scenario also in these instances. However, in the absence of nuclear weapons, war did in fact materialise on all accounts, as aggressor states lacked substantial incentives not to instigate conflict. Quantitative analysis lends support to Nuclear Peace theory, finding that symmetric balance between states in their nuclear stockpiles increases stability and security. On the other hand, nuclear asymmetry strengthens the likelihood of violent conflict between states.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, any acquisition of nuclear weapons by Japan should attempt to counterbalance the stockpiles of neighbouring states, rather than exceeding pre-existing arsenals in the region.

Kenneth Waltz similarly argued that more nuclear weapons mean more safety.<sup>25</sup> He pointed out that since the Second World War, the international community went through seismic changes such as decolonisation, technological and strategic innovation, rapid economic growth, and widespread nuclear proliferation. Although war regularly ensued between non-nuclear states, war never transpired on a significant scale between nuclear states. Almost forty years later, this trend remains unchanged. Scholars have pointed out how nuclear weapons have made the idea of winning a war against a great power impossible, as no one initiates an attack of great significance knowing it will mean certain death for themselves.<sup>26</sup> Of course, a single devastating nuclear war would turn this hypothesis on its head. Correspondingly however, its validity strengthens each day that nuclear weapons deter powerful states from attacking one another. While Japan has been hesitant to acquire nuclear weapons itself, it is widely recognized that US nuclear protection is necessary to protect it from China and North Korea.<sup>27</sup> This is reflected by the fact that even liberal intellectuals in Japan tend to embrace deterrence-logic when discussing national security issues. This is done without fully embracing nuclear

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<sup>22</sup> Bernard Brodie, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Brace and Company, 1946), 62.

<sup>23</sup> Julian Lewis, “Nuclear Disarmament versus Peace in the Twenty-First Century”, *International Affairs* 82, no. 4 (2006), 667, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3874151>

<sup>24</sup> Robert Rauchhaus, “Evaluating the Nuclear Peace Hypothesis: A Quantitative Approach”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 2 (2009): 258-277, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002708330387>

<sup>25</sup> Waltz, *Spread of Nuclear Weapons*

<sup>26</sup> Robert J. Art, “Between Assured Destruction and Nuclear Victory: The Case for the “Mad-Plus” Posture”, *Ethics* 95, no. 3 (1985): 513, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2381034>

<sup>27</sup> Doug Bandow, “America’s Asian Allies Need Their Own Nukes”, *Foreign Policy*, 30 December 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/30/nuclear-weapons-china-great-power-competition-asia/>

weapons, such as Shigeru Ishiba who praised Japan’s plutonium policy as acting as a limited form of deterrence.<sup>28</sup>

Are there ways of credibly defending a state that does not involve a purportedly unstable measure such as nuclear deterrence? Japan operates a comparatively impressive missile defence system commissioned by the government for geopolitical reasons. It consists of two destroyers, a warship with AN/SQP-9B radar systems, and four additional destroyers with Aegis missile defence systems and SM-3 interceptors.<sup>29</sup> By 2021, all ships are to be armed with the SM-3 Block IIA interception systems, widely considered the best on the market. However, in assessing its efficiency, scholars have pointed out that this defence system remains not fully viable as an option for preventing a North Korean attack, as it has failed two out of three interception tests.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, the US possesses the most expensive missile defence system in the world at the cost of \$70 billion, yet half of all interception tests still fail. That is even considering assertions that state-conducted tests are easier to intercept given their predictability compared to external missile attacks.<sup>31</sup> If Japan wants credible protection against nuclear missiles, it seems unlikely to find it in missile defence systems. It seems reasonable to conclude that the only worthwhile deterrent to a nuclear weapon is another nuclear weapon.

In July and September 2017, North Korea sent two missiles directly over Japan in a move described as highly threatening to the Japanese public.<sup>32</sup> In March 2020, North Korea escalated testing by firing three projectiles into the Sea of Japan, putting further doubt into the outcome of seemingly successful diplomatic talks.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, the public debate on nuclear deterrence has seen a resurgence in recent years, with a particular emphasis on North Korea.

Yet Japan must also consider what nuclearization would mean vis-à-vis China. The Sino-Japanese bilateral relationship has been described as one of the world’s most complex, in part due to historical animosity.<sup>34</sup> And while an attack is considered highly unlikely, China’s significant nuclear stockpile is of great concern to Japan. As of today, Japan’s strategy centres around advocating for regional denuclearization while enjoying protection of the US nuclear umbrella. This appears to be the path of least resistance, maintaining a functional status quo with an overarching goal of easing tensions without overtly provoking China. However, for the international community, there could be vast untapped potential in deterring expansionist behaviour from China by advocating limited nuclear proliferation in the region. Western states are well served by containing China’s assertive promotion of authoritarian values by strengthening states in the region that possess more peaceful and democratic behaviour. There is much to be lost in the realms of democracy and human rights if China can freely set the

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<sup>28</sup> Fumihiko Yoshida, “Japan Should Scrutinise the Credibility of the US Nuclear Umbrella: An Interview with Shigeru Ishiba”, *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1507414>

<sup>29</sup> Monica Montgomery, “Japan Expands Ballistic Missile Defenses”, *Arms Control Today* 48, no. 7 (2018), 32-33, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2115668338>

<sup>30</sup> Montgomery, “Japan Expands Ballistic Missile Defenses”

<sup>31</sup> Deverrick Holmes, “Congress is not asking the right questions about missile defense”, *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 25 June 2019, <https://thebulletin.org/2019/06/congress-is-not-asking-the-right-questions-about-missile-defense/>

<sup>32</sup> Yasuhiro Izumikawa, “The North Korea Factor in the 2017 Election”, in *Japan Decides 2017: The Japanese General Election*, ed. Pekkanen, R. J., Reed, S. R., Scheiner, E. and Smith, D. M (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 313-327.

<sup>33</sup> Ankit Panda, “North Korea Launches 3 Unknown Projectiles Into Sea of Japan”, *The Diplomat*, 9 March 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/north-korea-launches-3-unknown-projectiles-into-sea-of-japan/>

<sup>34</sup> Carnegie Endowment, “Implications of China’s Nuclear Policy for Other Countries” [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ChinaChanging\\_CH5.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ChinaChanging_CH5.pdf): p. 54.

political agenda without regional competitors, as recently observed in relation with the CCP's support of the 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar. By advocating nuclearization of Japan, this can help shift the regional balance in favour of western-aligned states reducing both the responsibility and reach of the US, simultaneously gratifying Chinese wishes for a regional leadership role while also strengthening Japan's ability to serve as a counterbalancing force. China is also likely to be more content with a larger security presence by Japan at the cost of US influence, as it sees American activity on its doorstep as overreach by an intrusive and alien state.<sup>35</sup> Presenting a more direct challenge to China's regional dominance was also one of the objectives of the Abe doctrine<sup>36</sup>, although the former Prime Minister would have been less inhibited from doing so if he had nuclear weapons at his disposal. And while Japanese nuclearization could itself unsettle China; it would provide further incentive for China to lay off an invasion of Taiwan, by involving Taiwan under a Japanese-US nuclear umbrella. In sum, there is potentially much to be earned vis-à-vis China in Japan acquiring nuclear weapons. The most urgent and unpredictable threat in the region, however, remains North Korea.

### ***The Future of the North Korean Nuclear Weapons Programme***

The International Atomic Energy Agency recently reported that North Korea is still expanding its nuclear weapons programme despite what can be described as moderate success in diplomatic talks between North and South.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of several highly unusual events having transpired over the past years such as the historic handshake between leaders of North and South at the DMZ, as well as the diplomatic acrobatics of an unorthodox US president, real progress appears difficult to verify. In addition to ongoing nuclear expansion, international groups of scientists who spent several weeks as observers at the Yongbyon nuclear facilities have reported that North Korea is capable of swiftly rebuilding nuclear facilities previously dismantled under international agreements.<sup>38</sup>

It is estimated that North Korea currently maintains around ten to twenty nuclear weapons and has material ready to construct another thirty to sixty.<sup>39</sup> Capacities have improved significantly over the past two decades, and six successful tests of nuclear weapons have occurred since 2006. The most powerful bomb had a yield of approximately 250 kilotons, around fifteen times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.<sup>40</sup>

Once a state possesses nuclear weapons, it is highly unlikely to relinquish them. Advocates of nuclear non-proliferation make strong idealist assertions that appeal to pacifist values in their pleas to unilaterally compel western nuclear powers to disarm, but such opinions hold little weight in global realpolitik. Beyond numerous arguments demonstrating that nuclear

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Mastandundo, "Partner Politics: Russia, China, and the Challenge of Extending US Hegemony after the Cold War", *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019), 503, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1604984>

<sup>36</sup> Hughes et al, *Japan's Grand Strategy*: 128

<sup>37</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency, *Application of Safeguards in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Report by the Director General*, [https://www-legacy.iaea.org/About/Policy/GC/GC62/GC62Documents/English/gc62-12\\_en.pdf](https://www-legacy.iaea.org/About/Policy/GC/GC62/GC62Documents/English/gc62-12_en.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Siegfried S. Hecker, "The risks of North Korea's nuclear restart", *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 12 May 2009, <https://thebulletin.org/2009/05/the-risks-of-north-koreas-nuclear-restart/>

<sup>39</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, and Robert S. Norris, "North Korean nuclear capabilities, 2018", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 74, no. 1 (2018): 44-48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2017.1413062>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

proliferation would not necessarily make the world a safer place<sup>41 42 43 44</sup>, it is worth noting that the movement against nuclear weapons is a phenomenon primarily manifesting itself in the west, unlikely to proliferate into new regions.<sup>45</sup>

This seems particularly true for North Korea. Ever since the state ratified the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985, several attempts have been made through initiatives such as the Six Party Talks to encourage North Korea to denuclearize. Western states have even made payments in the form of oil and food shipments, to no avail.<sup>46</sup> The difficult negotiations underline the limitations of diplomacy, as North Korea’s objectives can hardly be appeased by anything western-aligned states can offer. Patrick McEachern from the American Foreign Service Journal has delineated the two overarching strategic goals of North Korea; an end to economic sanctions (short-term) and bolstering national security from a perceived American existential threat (long-term).<sup>47</sup> The short-term goal can be alleviated in return for promises of limited denuclearization, however any real attempts at strengthening national security for North Korea cannot co-exist with substantial denuclearization. The risks are simply too high, something the regime knows quite well.

Only four states have backed down from being nuclear powers. South Africa did so voluntarily in 1990, although it can be argued that South Africa was a special case given the few geopolitical threats in its vicinity, which diminished quickly in the aftermath of the Cold War.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Pretoria likely realised that the dismantlement of apartheid was on the horizon, which would have factored in during the all-white government’s decision-making process. The three remaining states having denuclearised their weapons arsenals, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus, did so after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It remains a subject of debate to what extent these newly founded states exerted control over their arsenals vis-à-vis Moscow, putting into question just how much of a voluntary denuclearisation it really was.<sup>49</sup> In the case of Ukraine, denuclearisation appears a direct cause for war to be inflicted upon its territory in 2014, a prediction made by realists already as the Soviet collapse was unfolding.<sup>50</sup> Ukraine voluntarily relinquished its nuclear arsenal of 1,900 warheads – at the time the third largest in the world – in exchange for security assurances by Russia under the Budapest Memorandum.<sup>51</sup> By considering that no two nuclear powers have ever gone to war, the Russian decision to annex Crimea and invade Eastern Ukraine seems contingent on the abolishment of

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<sup>41</sup> Michal Onderco, “Why nuclear weapon ban treaty is unlikely to fulfil its promise”, *Global Affairs* 3, No. 4-5, 391-404 (2013): <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2017.1409082>

<sup>42</sup> Lewis, *Nuclear Disarmament*

<sup>43</sup> Waltz, *Spread of Nuclear Weapons*

<sup>44</sup> Raucchaus, *Nuclear Peace Hypothesis*

<sup>45</sup> Matthew Harries, “The Real Problem With a Nuclear Ban Treaty”, *Carnegie: Endowment for International Peace*, 15 March 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/15/real-problem-with-nuclear-ban-treaty-pub-68286>

<sup>46</sup> Council of Foreign Relations, “North Korean Nuclear Negotiations: 1985-2019”, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/north-korean-nuclear-negotiations>

<sup>47</sup> Patrick McEachern, “What Does North Korea Want?” *American Foreign Service Association*, October 2019, <https://www.afsa.org/what-does-north-korea-want>

<sup>48</sup> Liberman, P. (2001) The Rise and Fall of the South African Bomb, *International Security*, Vol. 26(2), pp. 45-86. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092122>

<sup>49</sup> Erik Gartzke and Matthew Kroenig, “A Strategic Approach to Nuclear Proliferation”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 2 (2009), 154, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002708330039>

<sup>50</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent”, *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 50-66, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20045622>

<sup>51</sup> Steven Pifer, “Why Care About Ukraine and the Budapest Memorandum”, *Brookings*, 12 May 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/12/05/why-care-about-ukraine-and-the-budapest-memorandum/>

Ukrainian nuclear weapons. It appears likely that North Korea, unpredictable yet certainly rational in its desire for regime survival, has learned its lessons from the Ukrainian example which underlined the unreliability of promises by great powers. In short, there are few conceivable concessions offered by western-aligned regimes that would be likely to see North Korea resign its strongest guarantee of national security. Considering the US as an existential threat, North Korea has little to gain by abolishing its nuclear capabilities.

Consequently, North Korea's ability to attack Japan with nuclear weapons will not be expunged, and Japan has to live with a number of unpredictable nuclear neighbours on its doorstep. Currently safeguarded under the US nuclear umbrella, Japan does at present enjoy external nuclear deterrence from a North Korean attack. However, as the world enters a phase of increased nationalism, an increasingly powerful China, and democratic backsliding, this protection appears less secure than in previous decades.

### ***Assessing Reliability of US Protection in the Age of Nationalist Populism***

Only eight decades ago, US and Japanese schoolchildren were taught in class to despise each other as cultural and racial antagonists. Toxic attitudes between the two states were exasperated by reciprocal atrocities committed during the Second World War, including but not limited to nuclear bombing, excessive firebombing of Tokyo and other Japanese cities, the attack on Pearl Harbour, and inhumane treatment of POWs. Considering this traumatic historical backdrop, the trans-pacific alliance has been remarkably stable in the post-war period.<sup>52</sup> The conciliatory tone of the relationship was amplified under Shinzo Abe, who visited Pearl Harbour in 2016 in what was seen as an attempt to finalise any lingering disputes in the alliance.<sup>53</sup>

The visit followed longstanding positive development between the two allies, in which several joint strategic measures were adopted. US army bases on Japanese territory are frequently referred to as 'cornerstone[s] of national security'<sup>54</sup>. From 2015, the bilateral security ties were strengthened and integrated further through the Alliance Coordination Mechanism (ACM) and the Bilateral Planning Mechanism (BPM), allowing for daily and more streamlined military cooperation.<sup>55</sup> According to a report by the US Congressional Research Service, Washington has 54,000 troops stationed in Japan and remains determined to act as guarantor for its safety.<sup>56</sup> However, the report also states that Tokyo would likely reconsider its stance on acquisition of nuclear weapons if US security guarantees are weakened.<sup>57</sup> The report subsequently considers Japan's hypothetical acquisition of nuclear weapons to be a catalyst for declining US influence in the region. Meanwhile, Japan's National Defence Program states that 'In dealing with the threat of nuclear weapons, US extended deterrence, with nuclear deterrence at its core, is essential: Japan will closely cooperate with the United States to maintain and enhance its credibility.'<sup>58</sup> Hence, it appears that the problem of Japan's

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<sup>52</sup> Michael J. Green, "The US-Japan Alliance: A Brief Strategic History", *Education about Asia* 12, no. 3 (1999): 25-30, <https://www.asianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/the-us-japan-alliance-a-brief-strategic-history.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Hughes et al, *Japan's Grand Strategy*

<sup>54</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1750635218810904>

<sup>55</sup> Hughes et al, *Japan's Grand Strategy*, 134.

<sup>56</sup> US Congressional Research Service, *The U.S.-Japan Alliance*, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33740.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 36

<sup>58</sup> Japanese Ministry of Defence, *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and beyond (Provisional Translation)*, 18 December 2019, 8, [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/20181218\\_e.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/20181218_e.pdf)

government resides not with the philosophy of nuclear deterrence itself, but merely with convincing its population that national ownership is preferable to American protection. In other words, by accepting the protection of the US nuclear umbrella, Japan's government implicitly endorses the key tenets of nuclear peace theory, trusting that deterrence is a course of action that will increase rather than weaken international structures promoting peace and stability. Said even more bluntly, Japan only wants to remain pacifist as long as US power guarantees their safety. The key issue as far as Japan is concerned is therefore not related to whether nuclear weapons can enhance stability, this seems to be a settled matter, rather ownership of nuclear weapons is what Japanese politicians cannot justify. This delegates formation of defence policy away from Japan itself, and hands the reins of Japan's safety to a state which has shown far more contemporary malevolence than Japan would be likely to exert in the near future. Therefore, Japan's acquisition of nuclear weapons might not only be in its own interest, rather it would also benefit the international community as a whole.

*'If Japan is attacked, we will fight World War III. We will go in and protect them with our lives [...] we will fight at all costs, but if we are attacked, Japan doesn't have to help us at all. They can watch on a Sony television.'* – Former US President Donald Trump <sup>59</sup>

Former President Trump described NATO as obsolete, threatened to withdraw the US from the organization, and made frequent controversial statements about close allies, having contributed to decreased international credibility in the US. In fact, allies' trust in the US has never been weaker in modern history.<sup>60</sup> As presidential candidate in 2016, Trump stated that Japan should acquire nuclear weapons to deter North Korea on its own.<sup>61</sup> While he was narrowly defeated in the 2020 election, Republican foreign policy doctrine appears significantly and irreversibly altered. It has become far more difficult to predict the future of US foreign policy, in particular its military commitments to allies. While American protection of Japan currently remains secure, few guarantees can be made for the next decade. The domestic political situation in the US, characterized by extreme polarisation and widespread inability to reach bipartisan agreements, does undoubtedly destabilise Japan's security, as the long-term prospects for effective protection are undermined. As a result, scholars have argued that obtaining defensive nuclear weapons would increase Japanese international autonomy, both in general as well as vis-à-vis North Korea and China.<sup>62</sup> In other words, nuclear weapons would help liberate Japan from the political whims of an increasingly unreliable superpower.

### **Conclusion**

This article has made four arguments in favour of the nuclear armament of Japan. The opinion of the Japanese public seems distorted in disfavour of nuclear weapons due to historical reasons, although Japanese elite opinion remains more positive to such armament. Through

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<sup>59</sup> Barney Henderson, "Donald Trump savages Japan, saying all they will do is 'watch Sony TVs' if US is attacked and threatening to 'walk' away from treaty", *The Telegraph*, 8 May 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/08/05/donald-trump-savages-japan-saying-all-they-will-do-is-watch-sony/>

<sup>60</sup> Joyce P. Kaufman, "The US perspective on NATO under Trump: lessons of the past and prospects for the future", *International Affairs* 93, no. 2 (2017): 251-266, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix009>

<sup>61</sup> Mark Makela, "Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on his Foreign Policy Views", *The New York Times*, 26 March 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-transcript.html>

<sup>62</sup> Joshua Pickar, "Japan's defensive constitution: nuclear weapons as a better alternative than expanding collective self-defense", *Law School International Immersion Papers*, no. 20 (2016), [https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=international\\_immersion\\_program\\_papers](https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=international_immersion_program_papers)

analysing and discussing traditional thoughts of nuclear deterrence rooted in Nuclear Peace Theory, this paper has found that Japan's safety is likely to increase through acquisition of nuclear weapons. Examination of North Korea's nuclear programme suggests the dictatorship is highly unlikely to disarm in the near future, rather it seems likely the dictatorship will increase its nuclear stockpile. Finally, the US position as an unquestionable ally has been weakened by the Trump administration, and the international community would be well served by allowing a contemporary peaceful state like Japan to take more control of its defence policy. In conclusion, this essay finds that Japan certainly should acquire a limited set of nuclear weapons for defensive purposes.