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REINFORCING AMERICAN EXTENDED DETERRENCE FOR JAPAN:

AN ESSENTIAL STEP FOR NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

Yukio Satoh

Prompted by the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons advocated by four eminent strategists (George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger and Sam Nunn), debates on how to reduce nuclear weapons with the aim of ultimately eliminating them are gathering momentum.

That President Barack Obama pledged in his Inaugural Address to “work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat” is raising hope for progress in the direction envisaged by the vision.

Needless to say, US-Russia cooperation to restore and advance arms control regimes and agreements and to realize further reduction of their

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nuclear weapons stockpiles is prerequisite for any efforts in nuclear disarmament, particularly when seeking to engage China, the UK, France and other nuclear weapons states in the endeavor. Efforts by nuclear weapons states to reduce their stockpiles are essential to invigorate the NPT regime.

US ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty is the vital first step in this context. This would help restore American leadership in arms control and disarmament diplomacy and give political momentum to the pursuit of a world free of nuclear weapons.

Yet, in order to make the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons a globally shared policy goal, the different security concerns held by the countries concerned facing varied geo-political and strategic conditions will have to be addressed.

For obvious reasons, the Japanese are second to none in wishing for the total elimination of nuclear weapons. However, given Japan's vulnerability to North Korea's progressing nuclear and missile programs and China's growing military power, ensuring American commitment to deterring threats from nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction is a matter of prior strategic importance for Tokyo.

Japan has long been committed to the Three Non-Nuclear Principles of not possessing nuclear weapons, not producing them and not permitting their entry into the country. A prevalent and strong sentiment against nuclear weapons among the Japanese people lies behind the policy to deny themselves the possession of nuclear weapons in spite of the country's capabilities to do otherwise. The nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain vivid national memories.

Yet, strategically, Japan's adherence to the Three Non-Nuclear Principles depends largely, if not solely, upon the credibility of the Japan-US Security Treaty, or more specifically, that of the United States' commitment to defend Japan from any offensive action, including nuclear threats. In response, the US government has been steadfastly assuring the Japanese in an increasingly clear manner of American commitment to provide deterrence for Japan by all means, including nuclear.

Against this backdrop, the argument made by the aforementioned four eminent strategists in the tone-setting joint article published in *The Wall Street Journal* of January 4, 2007, that “the end of the Cold War made the doctrine of mutual Soviet-American deterrence obsolete”, was received with mixed reactions in Japan: welcome for the sake of nuclear disarmament and caution from the perspectives of security and defense. As depending upon the US’ extended nuclear deterrence will continue to be Japan’s only strategic option to neutralize potential or conceivable nuclear and other strategic threats, the Japanese are sensitive to any sign of increased uncertainties with regard to extended deterrence.

A unique feature of the Japan-US security arrangements is that there have been no consultations on how American extended deterrence should function, nor even any mechanism put in place for such consultations. This has been largely due to Japan’s reluctance to date to be involved in American nuclear strategy. The Japanese government had gone even further in promising the people that it would strictly apply the Non-Nuclear Principles to the entry of US vessels and aircraft even at a time when tactical nuclear weapons were reportedly aboard some of them.

In recent years, though, the Japanese have been more concerned about the credibility of the American commitment. Exposed to a series of threatening actions by Pyongyang, particularly its test-shooting of missiles over Japan (1998) and its nuclear testing (2006), the Japanese have come to realize anew how indispensable American deterrence is to their security. The abduction of Japanese citizens by Pyongyang’s agents, which became public knowledge in 2002, had added to Japanese security concerns about North Korea, so that the Bush administration’s decision to rescind (prematurely in Japanese eyes) the designation of the DPRK as a State Sponsor of Terrorism raised voices in Japan questioning Washington’s sense of solidarity with an ally.

It is indeed difficult to judge whether and how the concept of nuclear deterrence would work vis-à-vis North Korea, whose unpredictability makes it difficult to exclude the possibility that Pyongyang might use nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction out of desperation. Japan has therefore been

engaged in the development of ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems in cooperation with the United States.

Although BMD systems need to be much improved before they can be considered reliable, they are designed to eventually function, at least conceptually, as a supplementary means for defending the country against North Korea's missiles if and when deterrence were to fail. In addition, their purely defensive characteristics are stabilizing, rather than destabilizing, regional strategic balance.

In the meantime, Japanese concern about the credibility of American extended deterrence could increase if the US government would unilaterally move to redefine the concept of nuclear deterrence and to reduce dependence upon nuclear weapons in providing deterrence.

The time has come for the governments of Japan and the United States to articulate better the shared concept of extended deterrence, nuclear or otherwise, in order to assure the Japanese that deterrence will continue to function under changing strategic circumstances and with technological developments.

Such initiatives designed to reinforce the concept of American extended deterrence for Japan should not be seen as retrogression in the context of efforts to pursue a world free of nuclear weapons. On the contrary, it is an essential step in strengthening the efforts.

It is highly advisable for the two governments to create a mechanism for consultation through which Tokyo will be better informed of, and able to express its views on, the United States' nuclear strategy and planning. This would serve the dual purposes of making President Barack Obama's strong interests in reducing nuclear threats a leading light for the joint efforts to pursue a world free of nuclear weapons and also for a productive cause to strengthen further the Japan-US Security Treaty, which will mark its 50th anniversary in 2010. 

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