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TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN: NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT AND THE PEACEFUL USE OF NUCLEAR ENERGY

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There are currently two major trends occurring with regard to nuclear power: one is efforts toward the abolition of nuclear weapons and the other the growing interest in the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

The first trend, exemplified in the nuclear disarmament movement, originated in the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Until very recently, its main advocates have been the so-called “have-nots,” including Japan, the sole country to have suffered from atomic bombings, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries, Northern European countries, Australia, Canada,

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and New Zealand. They have argued rather from an idealistic standpoint, emphasizing the inhumanity of nuclear weapons.


The most distinctive feature of the recent nuclear disarmament movement is the advocacy by a “have” nation, or the United States, based on a realistic strategy that takes into account the post-Cold War security environment. The speech delivered by US President Barack Obama in Prague in April 2009 in particular was symbolic. It has both idealistic and realistic aspects, having established a high ideal of achieving a world without nuclear weapons based on a realistic assessment of the situation. The speech is providing a boost to the nuclear disarmament movement world-wide. We should not let this opportunity slip and we should take further concrete steps toward nuclear disarmament. The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), released in April 2010, moved Obama’s nuclear disarmament policy a step further by declaring a reduction in the number and role of nuclear weapons in the national security of the US and its allies.

In this regard, the recommendations jointly put forwarded by Japan and Australia in December 2009 on behalf of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament will serve as practical guiding principles. The recommendations paid due attention to the three pillars of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – nuclear disarmament, nuclear non-proliferation and the peaceful use of atomic energy – in a balanced manner, whereas the other recommendations on similar nuclear issues so far have placed greater emphasis on disarmament with little consideration given to peaceful use. Presenting a concrete roadmap of nuclear disarmament, the Japan-Australia joint recommendations are credited with being practical, realistic and implementable.

The second trend, the growing interest in atomic energy world-wide, including developing countries, is driven by concerns about energy security and global warming. This “nuclear renaissance” should be welcomed, but not without reservation because the growth in nuclear power generation will increase the risks of safety, nuclear proliferation and nuclear security. Nuclear power has the aspects of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and it could easily be turned to military purposes even though it was initially used for peaceful purposes.

In order to promote the peaceful use of nuclear power as sustainable energy, it is therefore important to stress safety, non-proliferation (safeguards) and security. This principle of the “three S’s” has already been agreed to by the G8 countries, and was included in the Leaders’ Declaration of the G8 Hokkaido Toyako Summit in 2008. However, further efforts should be made to turn the principle into concrete guidelines by, say, involving the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Particular attention must be paid to the uranium enrichment and the extraction of plutonium through spent nuclear fuel reprocessing. These are called “sensitive technologies” because they border on the peaceful and military use of nuclear power. Article IV of the NPT provides that all countries possess the “inalienable right” to research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. The international community, however, should consider imposing some restrictions on the research and development of these sensitive technologies. In order to regulate uranium enrichment, establishing an international mechanism to guarantee nuclear fuel supply may be effective. It may also be wise to limit the use of plutonium to those countries that already possess plutonium extraction technologies. The most ardent advocate of plutonium regulation is the United States. Such a course of action, however, could cause frictions with countries such as South Korea and Brazil that have expressed keen interest in establishing their own nuclear fuel cycle systems.

Nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation have so far been addressed separately. Faced with the risks emerging from uranium enrichment and spent nuclear fuel reprocessing, however, these should be viewed as two sides of the same coin. Some measure of international regulations to ensure the peaceful use of nuclear energy will be indispensable in order to push forward nuclear disarmament. 

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