

Japan Calls for United States to End Hair-Trigger Alert

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The United States and Russia keep their nuclear missiles on “launch-ready” alert, meaning that they can be launched within minutes. This status— often called “hair-trigger alert”—is a relic of the Cold War, when both countries were concerned about the possibility of a surprise nuclear attack by the other. Keeping their nuclear missiles on high alert gave them the ability to launch on warning of attack, so the incoming warheads could not destroy the missiles on the ground.

Today both countries see the chance of such surprise attacks as extremely low. This removes the rationale for keeping nuclear missiles on high alert. Continuing to do so increases the chances of accidental, mistaken, or unauthorized nuclear launches. A number of incidents in the last couple of decades have shown that concerns about such launches are justified (UCS 2015a).

The risks of continuing this policy have led to calls for the United States and Russia to take missiles off hair-trigger alert—including by President Obama as a candidate and early in his presidency (UCS 2015b). However, many U.S. experts who help formulate and implement U.S. security policy in Asia argue that changes that impact the role of U.S. nuclear weapons would undermine Japan’s confidence in its military alliance with the United States. These experts contend that these unwelcome changes could lead Japan to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and develop its own nuclear weapons (Campbell, Einhorn, and Reiss 2004). Such arguments reflect the paradoxical view that a robust U.S. nuclear arsenal, kept on Cold War era levels of high alert, is a necessary nuclear non-proliferation measure.

Despite the contentions of these experts, over the past 15 years Japanese administrations representing the nation’s political spectrum have urged all nuclear

The United States is obligated by treaty to defend Japan if it is attacked, but it is not obligated to defend it with nuclear weapons.

weapons states—including the United States—to take practical steps to de-alert their nuclear weapons:

- In 2000, the moderate LDP-led government of Yoshido Mori agreed to consensus language in the final document of the 2000 NPT Review Conference calling on nuclear weapons states to adopt “*concrete agreed measures to further reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems.*”
- In 2010, the liberal DPJ-led government of Yukio Hatoyama agreed to adopt the action plan of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, which called on nuclear weapons states to “*commit to accelerate concrete progress*” on de-alerting.
- In March 2014, the conservative—some would say hawkish—LDP-led government of Shinzo Abe submitted a joint working paper to the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 NPT Review Conference calling on all nuclear weapons states “*to take steps towards de-alerting their nuclear forces to help lower the risk of inadvertent use*” (Japan MOFA 2014).

During 12 trips to Japan over the past six years, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) conducted extensive interviews with elected and unelected members of the Japanese government. Those inter-

views leave little doubt that U.S. concerns about the possibility of a nuclear-armed Japan are unwarranted. Except for a few outliers, Japanese officials do not see possessing nuclear weapons as a solution to their national security problems (Lewis 2014).

This report—the third in a series on Japan and the U.S. nuclear posture—explores the findings from our interviews, as well as the history of the U.S.-Japanese security commitment. Contrary to what many people believe, this history shows that the United States does not provide a “nuclear umbrella” for Japan. Moreover, reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security policy—including taking U.S. nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert—is supported by an overwhelming majority of the Japanese public and their elected officials.

The Politics of Nuclear Weapons in Japan

Japan has a complicated relationship with nuclear weapons. The Japanese are the only people ever to suffer a nuclear attack. The survivors still testify to the world about the horrifying humanitarian consequences, and an overwhelming majority of Japanese remain determined to sustain their nation’s commitment to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used again.

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According to a recent Pew survey, nearly half of Japan’s people consider nuclear weapons the world’s greatest danger—a far higher percentage than in any of the other 43 nations polled (Pew 2014). Another recent survey shows that 82 percent of the Japanese public and most of Japan’s elected officials support

their nation’s role as an international advocate for nuclear disarmament (*Asahi Shimbun* 2014).

Yet the Japanese government is also a partner in a military alliance with the U.S. government, which believes that maintaining credible preparations to use nuclear weapons again is essential to the security of both the United States and its allies, including Japan. Moreover, a small group of unelected officials who work in Japan’s defense establishment are more committed to supporting U.S. nuclear weapons policy than to the humanitarian aspirations of the people they are supposed to serve (UCS 2013). These competing Japanese realities have produced an uneasy coexistence between a public diplomacy that promotes nuclear disarmament and a secretive defense establishment that supports U.S. nuclear weapons policies.

These tensions reflect the complex security relationship between the United States and Japan. The United States committed to defending Japan in exchange for its agreement not to re-arm after its defeat in World War II. The United States insisted on writing this prohibition into the new Japanese constitution, imposing military dependence on the Japanese governing elite. The Japanese public enthusiastically embraced this imposed pacifism as a cornerstone of Japan’s post-war identity.

Ironically, the U.S. government quickly came to see Japanese enthusiasm for the pacifist constitution as a constraint on the willingness of a wealthy and technologically proficient ally to make more significant contributions to U.S. security policy in Asia. Declassified reports from the 1950s circulated by the joint chiefs of staff detail U.S. impatience with the Japanese government’s unwillingness to re-arm, its unease about the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Japan, and its reluctance to become involved in military activities not directly connected to the defense of Japan (JCS 1958).

Japan’s codependent security status enabled the United States to use Japanese territory as a base for U.S. military operations throughout Asia. Over the past seven decades, the majority of those operations did not relate to the defense of Japan. The United States deployed nuclear weapons in Japan—including on bases on the island of Okinawa—not to defend the

nation from attack but to make the weapons available for possible use in other crises. A declassified National Security Council memo from 1969 described the broader purpose and importance of bases on Okinawa:

Okinawa houses the most important military base system in the Western Pacific, capable of performing a wide variety of functions. Its value is enhanced by the absence of any legal restriction on American free access to or use of the bases; which permits storage of nuclear weapons and the launching of military combat operations directly from those bases. Okinawa has been used extensively in U.S. military activities in East Asia over the past twenty years including logistics and training operations for Vietnam” (Wampler 2009).

During the Cold War, the United States developed specific options for nuclear attacks to counter threats to South Korea, Taiwan, and even Hong Kong. But the only U.S. nuclear war planning related to threats against Japan concerned war between the United States and the Soviet Union, and even in that case the defense of Japan does not appear to have been a significant concern.

By the end of the 1960s, Japanese sentiment against nuclear weapons had developed into a potent political issue, and the public demanded that the United States remove its nuclear weapons from Japanese territory. The public was also putting Prime Minister Eisaku Sato under enormous pressure to force the United States to return Okinawa—where it had deployed tactical nuclear weapons since World War II—to Japanese sovereignty (Sato 1974).

During a meeting of the Diet in 1968, Sato introduced Japan’s Three Non-Nuclear Principles, which stipulate that Japan will never produce, possess, or permit nuclear weapons on Japanese territory. The Diet formally adopted these principles in 1971, and Sato was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his contributions to nuclear disarmament, which also included signing the NPT.

At the same time, however, Sato signed a secret agreement with President Nixon—as a condition of the U.S. agreement to return Okinawa to Japanese sovereignty—that allowed the United States to bring nuclear weapons into Japanese territory at its discretion, and without prior notification (Wampler 2009).

To this day the United States insists on maintaining the non-confirm, non-denial policy regarding nuclear weapons on Japanese territory (WikiLeaks 2013a, 2013b).

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A Rare Public Debate

U.S. debates about the role of nuclear weapons in the defense of Japan have focused on a completely different issue: the possibility that a rising China could spur Japan to develop its own nuclear weapons. The U.S. - Japan security treaty, signed in 1960, obliges both nations to “act to meet the common danger” in response to a foreign armed attack. While there is no formal obligation to provide military assistance prior to an attack, defense analysts from both nations often claim the United States, as the stronger party, has given Japan an “extended deterrence” guarantee to reassure it that the United States will provide a credible defense against conventional or nuclear attacks on Japan. Given Japan’s reliance on this assurance to deter a possible attack by China, most U.S. analysts assume that any changes in the U.S. nuclear arsenal and strategy would create anxieties in the Japanese defense establishment that could somehow spur the government to withdraw from the NPT and start a nuclear weapons program (CCSPUS 2009).

These concerns make it difficult for U.S. decision makers to assess the potential impacts on Japan of

proposed changes in U.S. nuclear weapons policy. And because decisions on the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in defending Japan are almost always made in secret, nongovernmental organizations and individuals find it difficult to track and contribute to any such assessment.

To surmount those challenges, in 2010 UCS investigated a rare case when the closely held opinions of Japanese defense officials appeared in the U.S. public record (UCS 2010). During the new Obama administration's Nuclear Posture Review, four career diplomats from the Japanese embassy testified before a U.S. congressional commission that they would like to see the United States redeploy tactical nuclear weapons in Asia (USIP 2009).¹ These diplomats called for including the TLAM/N—a nuclear-armed cruise missile that President George H.W. Bush removed from U.S. attack submarines in 1991.

Eighty-two percent of the Japanese public and most of Japan's elected officials support their nation's role as an international advocate for nuclear disarmament.

In speaking with elected Japanese officials and nongovernmental organizations, we found that most were unaware of the testimony of the four political officers. The ensuing discussion of that testimony in the Japanese press and the Diet led Japan's foreign minister to write a letter to the U.S. secretary of state explaining that the opinions of the four political officers on U.S. nuclear weapons policy did not reflect the position of the Japanese government (Cuceck 2010). Two hundred members of the Diet signed a similar letter addressed to the U.S. president, the secretaries of state and defense, and the chairs of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees (PNND 2010).

¹In the post-Cold War era, a new administration typically conducts a Nuclear Posture Review to guide its decisions on U.S. nuclear policy, and advises Congress of the findings and implications of the review.

After its review, the Obama administration decided to permanently retire the TLAM/N, and no other U.S. tactical nuclear weapons are believed to be currently deployed in Asia. The two countries also established a new mechanism to formally discuss U.S. nuclear weapons: the Extended Deterrence Dialogue (EDD), which includes representatives from the U.S. State and Defense departments and the Japanese ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense.

What “Extended Deterrence” Actually Means

Despite the policy of extended deterrence, no treaty, document, or agreement between the two nations specifies that the United States will use nuclear weapons in response to an attack on Japan—or threaten to use nuclear weapons in response to threats against Japan. The United States is obligated by treaty to defend Japan if it is attacked, but it is not obligated to defend it with nuclear weapons. The choice to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons rests solely with the United States.

The long and contentious negotiations on nuclear arms control between the United States and the Soviet Union provide the most telling evidence that decisions on the U.S. nuclear posture did not particularly reflect concern about the defense of Japan. Instead, the security of U.S. allies in Europe played a prominent role in both those negotiations and U.S. nuclear strategy. The United States began formal consultations with European allies on nuclear weapons policy in 1966, establishing the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) within NATO. But the United States created no comparable channel of communication with Japan.

Nuclear war planners and arms control negotiators in Europe and the United States were most concerned about “decoupling”—the possibility that the United States would not risk a Soviet nuclear attack on itself to protect its European allies. Because those allies could not defend themselves, the United States would deter a Soviet invasion against them by threatening to retaliate against the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons. But such a strike would lead to Soviet nuclear retaliation against the United States. Europe-

an leaders questioned whether the United States would actually take such a risk.

In response, NATO developed strategies to fight a limited nuclear war with tactical, or “battlefield,” nuclear weapons. The United States would place nuclear weapons in Europe as a trigger in the event of a Soviet invasion. Theoretically, at least, these strategies and the visible deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe would credibly “couple” the use of these weapons to a Soviet invasion in the minds of Soviet leaders.

The United States did not intend the tactical nuclear weapons deployed on Okinawa and transported through Japan on U.S. military vessels to serve the same purpose. At one point during U.S.-Soviet negotiations on the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the United States was prepared to sign an interim agreement that would allow the Soviet Union to keep intermediate-range missiles in Asia, to ensure their removal from Europe. Japan expressed concerns about the agreement. In a secret cable to Secretary of State George Schultz in April 1983, Ambassador Mike Mansfield relayed Japan’s response:

The Japanese side drew attention to the line in Prime Minister Nakasone’s letter of response to President Reagan on the interim proposal, which read, ‘Even if the interim solution will not involve the transfer of SS-20’s to the Far East, it is important that due consideration be given to the security of Asia, comparable to that given to Europe.’ This language, they explained, is designed to meet Japanese concerns without saying reductions must be achieved in both regions (INF 1983).

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Paul Wolfowitz batted down the Japanese request for “due consideration”—already a step back from a previous Japanese request to have the United States insist that the Soviets remove all SS-20s from Asia if they were removing them from Europe. According to a Mansfield cable summarizing a “high level” meeting with the directors of the North

American, Soviet, and European bureaus of Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

To this day the United States insists on maintaining the non-confirm, non-denial policy regarding nuclear weapons on Japanese territory.

Wolfowitz pointed out that while the Japanese were asking for “due consideration comparable to that given Europe,” the European and Japanese situations were of course not precisely comparable and due consideration would have to take account of that fact. For example, we have no requirement for “coupling” through the basing of U.S. weapons on Japanese soil. Indeed, very much the opposite” (INF 1983).

The memo indicates that the U.S. nuclear weapons were deployed on U.S. naval vessels transiting U.S. military bases in Japan at that time, so Wolfowitz’s comments should be interpreted as referring to the purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons in Japan, not their presence. His comments explicitly confirm that those weapons were not in Japan to prevent decoupling—to deter a Soviet attack on Japan, or to reassure Japan of the credibility of the U.S. defense commitment in the event of such an attack. The memo also clearly indicates that Wolfowitz’s comments do not indicate a lack of U.S. respect for Japanese concerns, but rather U.S. assessments that Japan was an unlikely target of Soviet aggression that conventional U.S. forces could not meet.²

The persistent refusal of the U.S. government to admit whether it actually had nuclear weapons in Japan—even during highly secret negotiations on how

² Both Schultz and Wolfowitz publicly mentioned Japan’s concerns about Soviet SS-20s on several occasions between President Reagan’s meeting with Prime Minister Nakasone in January 1983 and the March 31 meeting discussed in Mansfield’s letter.

returning control of Okinawa to Japan would affect U.S. nuclear weapons policy—indicates the presence of nuclear weapons in Japan was not essential to fulfilling the U.S. treaty obligations to defend Japan (Kristensen 1999). Moreover, the U.S. decision to keep the presence of nuclear weapons secret suggests that concerns about public opposition to U.S. nuclear weapons outweighed the potential value of showing they were present to deter the Soviet Union or reassure anxious Japanese leaders.

Perhaps that is why the formal bilateral mechanism created in the wake of controversy surrounding Japan's input into the 2009 Nuclear Posture Review was called the Extended Deterrence Dialogue (EDD) rather than the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), as in Europe. The Japanese defense bureaucrats most closely associated with support for U.S. nuclear weapons policies repeatedly told UCS that they had wanted a forum similar to the NPG, and a relationship comparable to the one the United States established with NATO in 1966.

The U.S. decision to keep the presence of nuclear weapons secret suggests that concerns about public opposition to nuclear weapons outweighed the potential value of showing they were present to deter the Soviet Union.

But our interviews with U.S. and Japanese participants in the EDD confirmed that that did not happen. The EDD does not focus on nuclear deterrence but on deterrence in general. A senior U.S. Department of Defense official involved in the talks told us that the United States tries to downplay the role of nuclear issues in the EDD. That means that today's U.S.-Japanese dialogue on extended deterrence follows in the footsteps of the one led by Wolfowitz on the INF Treaty 30 years earlier. Now, as then, the U.S. government continues to affirm that the credibility of the U.S. defense commitment to Japan does not depend on U.S. nuclear weapons.

Why Japan Is Not a Proliferation Risk

The most difficult question confronting outside observers today is whether the contradiction between Japanese government support for nuclear disarmament and the pro-nuclear preferences of some Japanese officials reflects U.S. pressure on Japan, Japanese pressure on the United States, or mutual consent. U.S. officials who argue that the United States cannot reduce the role of nuclear weapons in the alliance because Japan might develop nuclear weapons obviously believe Japanese officials are exerting pressure on the United States. Yet *all* the Japanese officials we recently interviewed—including the lead political officer who testified in 2009 in support of redeploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Asia—argue that Japan has no leverage on the U.S. nuclear posture.

The opinions expressed in these interviews are consistent with those in a confidential Japanese Defense Agency (JDA) study of Japan's nuclear options conducted by some of the country's most conservative defense analysts. The study was commissioned by Japanese elected leaders to inform their decision on whether to back a permanent extension of the NPT in 1995. At the time, North Korea had embarked on a program to develop nuclear weapons, and the Chinese Communist Party, which had recently crushed student-led protests with lethal military force, was threatening Taiwan with missile launches. The study also considered the possibility that China might use nuclear intimidation to reinforce its claims to the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands, a focus of tensions between Japan and China.

The study found no imaginable scenario where a decision to develop nuclear weapons would be in Japan's national security interests. Even in a worst-case scenario positing a "break-up of the U.S.-Japan alliance, a collapse of the nonproliferation regime, and an inclination of various countries to go nuclear," the study concludes:

Even in such a case, it is questionable whether there is any value for a trading nation that depends on the stability of international society to try to secure its survival and protect its interests with its own nuclear weapons. It would more like-

ly undermine the basis of its own survival. Only in a case where destitution reaches a stage where the exchange of damage with an opponent is not a concern anymore, would the geopolitical vulnerability of Japan make the nuclear option a possibility. This, however, is a case where a condition becomes its own goal, and is not worthy of consideration” (JDA 1995).

If Japan’s most conservative defense analysts believe that a collapse of both the NPT and the U.S.-Japan alliance are not cause to develop nuclear weapons, modest changes to U.S. nuclear weapons policy—such as taking all U.S. land-based ICBMs off hair-trigger alert—should not raise fears that Japan might respond by withdrawing from the NPT and starting a nuclear weapons program.

The Role of Nuclear Symbolism

Despite the fact that U.S. nuclear weapons have never played a substantive role in treaty obligations to defend Japan, a small group of Japanese defense bureaucrats continues to oppose any relaxation of the U.S. nuclear posture—including taking U.S. ICBMs off hair-trigger alert. Their objections have little to do with concerns about the U.S. ability to defend against specific military threats to Japan. They focus instead on the symbolic role of nuclear weapons.

For example, a leading Japanese defense expert who was an author of the 1995 report on Japan’s nuclear options told UCS that he opposed de-alerting the ICBMs because “it would risk eroding crisis stability in U.S.-Russian nuclear relations.” Other defense officials told us that they opposed de-alerting because it would “send the wrong message” to North Korea and China regarding the U.S. commitment to Asia. Neither of these justifications for maintaining U.S. nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert are specifically connected to substantive requirements for the U.S. defense of Japan.

Some U.S. defense experts also emphasize nuclear symbolism over substance. Brad Roberts, who played a leading role in the dialogue with Japan on extended deterrence, argues that the current U.S. nu-

clear posture needs to be maintained in order to address Japanese concerns about decoupling (C-SPAN 2013). But he seems to be talking largely about a psychological coupling—wherein U.S. nuclear weapons serve as a symbol of U.S. resolve.

In discussing the Obama administration’s Nuclear Posture Review, in which he also played a leading role, Roberts claims that as a result of Japanese input, the United States is now “committing to modernize a globally deployable force of fighter-bombers equipped with nuclear bombs”:

The functions of that force are (1) to signal the shared and collective resolve of the United States and its allies to stand together in the face of nuclear coercion and aggression and (2) to enable the display and employment of lower-yield nuclear weapons with non-strategic delivery systems in support of commitments to U.S. allies (Roberts 2013).

Taking U.S. ICBMs off hair-trigger alert would fulfill the U.S. commitment to the NPT while supporting a long-standing diplomatic initiative of one of its most important allies.

The new policy appears to have received a trial run in May 2013, when the United States flew two nuclear-capable B-2 stealth bombers over South Korea, reportedly in response to North Korean provocations. According to a U.S. military spokesperson, the purpose of the flight was to “provide extended deterrence to our allies in the Asia-Pacific region.”

Roberts’ use of “employment” suggests that one intent of the policy is to threaten the actual use of U.S. nuclear weapons. However, as Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey explained, the target of the exercise was not North Korea:

The reaction to the B-2 that we’re most concerned about is not necessarily the reaction it might elicit in North Korea, but rather among our

Japanese and Korean allies. Those exercises are mostly to assure our allies that they can count on us to be prepared and to help them deter conflict” (Shanker and Choe 2013).

Roberts justifies using U.S. nuclear weapons to provide psychological assurance to anxious defense planners in Tokyo by claiming that a “failure to ensure extended deterrence and strategic stability could seriously set back nonproliferation and disarmament efforts” (C-SPAN 2013). In other words, for Roberts and many other Asia experts in the U.S. government, the purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons, as they relate to Japan, is to prevent Japan from developing its own nuclear weapons.

The U.S. government continues to affirm that the credibility of the U.S. defense commitment to Japan does not depend on U.S. nuclear weapons.

However, using U.S. nuclear weapons for this purpose is unnecessary if even the most hawkish members of the Japanese defense establishment agree that there is no imaginable scenario wherein a decision to develop nuclear weapons would be in Japan’s national security interests. If a complete collapse of the alliance would not trigger a Japanese decision to develop nuclear weapons, minor adjustments to U.S. nuclear weapons policy—such as lowering the alert level of U.S. ICBMs—should not be cause for U.S. concern.

Fulfilling U.S. Commitments to the NPT while Supporting a Key Ally

Our assessment of the history of the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in the defense of Japan, and our consultations with Japanese stakeholders—including elected officials and non-governmental organizations—indicates that removing U.S. ICBMs from hair-trigger alert would have no negative conse-

quences other than a highly questionable and marginal psychological impact on a small group of Japanese defense officials. But Japan could reap considerable benefits should the United States decide to take that step.

The continued viability of the NPT—which both the Japanese public and elected officials strongly support—depends on the good-faith efforts of the United States to live up to its obligations under the treaty. Taking U.S. ICBMs off hair-trigger alert would partially fulfill the U.S. commitment to the NPT while supporting a longstanding diplomatic initiative of one of its most important allies.

As noted, successive Japanese administrations have repeatedly urged nuclear weapons states to take their nuclear forces off high alert. In March 2014 Japan—along with the other 10 nations of its Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative—once again called on all nuclear weapons states to announce concrete measures to de-alert nuclear weapons during the 2015 NPT Review Conference.³

A U.S. decision to de-alert the nation’s ICBMs would win enthusiastic support from a broad majority of Japanese elected officials and the overwhelming majority of the Japanese public. The Japanese government would not respond to such a decision by withdrawing from the NPT and developing its own nuclear weapons program.

U.S. Asia experts who believe that de-alerting U.S. ICBMs might cause the Japanese government to lose confidence in the U.S.-Japan alliance give far too much weight to the opinions of a handful of bureaucrats in the Japanese defense establishment who have a history of secretly supporting U.S. nuclear weapons policies—contrary to Japan’s public diplomacy, the requirements of Japanese law, and the express wishes of the Japanese public. The United States would be wise to pay greater heed to the democratically expressed aspirations of the Japanese people than to unelected bureaucrats when making decisions on nuclear weapons policies.

³ Other members of the initiative are Australia, Canada, Chile, Germany, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (Japan MOFA 2015).

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