

Why Japan Should Support No First Use

Last year, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* reported that President Obama was considering ruling out the first-use of nuclear weapons, as one of several possible steps toward the vision he outlined in his 2009 speech in Prague, “to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” He reaffirmed this vision during his visit to Hiroshima in May, when he said: “among those nations like my own that hold nuclear stockpiles, we must have the courage to escape the logic of fear and pursue a world without them.”

Former officials, including former Defense Secretary William Perry and former Strategic Command commander and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff General James Cartright, spoke out in favor of no-first-use. The *Times* article quoted Cartwright: “nuclear weapons today no longer serve any purpose beyond deterring the first use of such weapons by our adversaries.”

According to the *Times* and *Post* reports, the main reason that President Obama did not adopt a policy of no first use was concern about the reaction of allies—particularly Japan. In fact, the *Washington Post* reported that Prime Minister Abe personally conveyed his opposition to no first use, because he believed that it could increase the likelihood of conventional conflict with North Korea or China.

President Obama left office without adopting a policy of no first use or making any additional major changes to U.S. nuclear policy. President Trump is unlikely to consider no first use or other policies that would reduce the number of nuclear weapons or the role they play in U.S. national security policy. Indeed, Trump has called for strengthening and expanding U.S. nuclear capability.

But Mr. Trump will not be president forever. I think we should take this opportunity to open up a dialogue between the United States and Japan on the role that nuclear weapons should play in our mutual defense—and in particular the question of whether the United States should use or threaten to use nuclear weapons first in the defense of Japan, and under what circumstances Japan would welcome the adoption of such a policy of no first use by United States.

Cold War Origins

Before looking to future, it is useful to review the history of no first use. For this we have to go back to the 1948. Europe was divided between East and West, and the number of soldiers, tanks, and artillery deployed by the East was far greater than the number deployed by the West. Western European countries, which were still rebuilding after the war, did not have capacity or the will to match the Soviet build-up.

The 1948 Berlin Crisis made clear that Soviet Union was aggressive and that the United States would be unable to stop it through conventional means alone. After the Crisis, the United States adopted a policy of using nuclear weapons to deter or respond to a Soviet invasion of Europe.

The Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1949 did not cause the U.S. to abandon this policy. Rather, it caused the U.S. to greatly accelerate the production of nuclear weapons and long-range bombers and to begin the development of thermonuclear weapons to maintain nuclear superiority.

The Eisenhower Administration placed even greater emphasis on nuclear weapons as a low-cost counter to the large armies of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. In 1953, the U.S. decided to produce and forward-deploy large numbers of tactical nuclear weapons—nuclear land mines, artillery shells, rockets, and bombs—for battlefield use in Europe. Eisenhower also adopted a policy of “massive retaliation,” in which the United States promised to respond to any Soviet attack with immediate and massive nuclear retaliation, both to stop an invasion and to destroy strategic targets in the Soviet Union. This was sometimes called “security on the cheap” because nuclear weapons were less expensive than troops and tanks.

These threats were considered credible in the early 1950s because the Soviet Union did not have the capacity to strike the United States. But as Soviet nuclear capability grew and the U.S. became more and more vulnerable to Soviet nuclear attack, the credibility of U.S. threats to start a nuclear war were questioned.

This was often summarized in the form of a question, “Would an American president be willing to risk New York or Washington or Chicago to save London or Paris or Hamburg?” The need to convince both the Soviet Union and U.S. allies that we would do so was a key factor driving the nuclear arms race. It led to the deployment of over 7,000 tactical nuclear weapons in Europe by the late 1960s. It also raised the very real possibility that, should we fail to deter a Soviet invasion, Europe would be destroyed by the very weapons that were intended to protect it.

When the Soviet Union reached nuclear parity with the United States, it cast serious doubt on the credibility of U.S. threats to use nuclear weapons first. An American president might not carry through with the threat because it would lead to the destruction of the United States and Europe; understanding this, the Soviet Union might gamble and invade. This led the United States and NATO to undertake a series of risky policies to enhance the credibility of nuclear retaliation, in part by limiting our ability to control escalation. Hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers and thousands of nuclear weapons were placed close to the border, in a “use-it-or-lose-it” position vulnerable to being overrun in the early hours of an invasion.

The Soviets countered with their own tactical nuclear weapons, together with a pledge not use nuclear weapons first. This led to the NATO decision to deploy intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missiles and Pershing-II ballistic missiles in Europe. Because these forces could attack Moscow and other targets deep inside the Soviet Union, they were seen as coupling the United States more tightly to Europe, by preventing a nuclear war from being confined to Europe.

After the Cold War

This logic and the problems it created collapsed with the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. The conventional balance of power shifted dramatically in favor of the United States and NATO. There was no longer a need to threaten to use nuclear weapons first to deter a conventional Soviet—or Russian—attack. Nuclear weapons were needed only to deter a nuclear attack.

The first post-Cold-War secretary of defense, Les Aspin, ordered a review of U.S. nuclear policy and stated that no-first-use could form the basis of a new nonproliferation policy. Unfortunately, that Nuclear Posture Review—and the

two that followed—rejected no first use, largely due to concerns expressed by allies.

In November 1993 Russia discarded its no-first-use pledge, to compensate for its perceived conventional inferiority. Russian reliance on threats of nuclear first-use increased with NATO expansion to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999, and to the Baltic states in 2004. Most recently, Russia adopted an “escalate-to-descalete” doctrine that envisions the first use of low-yield tactical nuclear weapons in conflicts near its borders against a conventionally superior NATO force.

The United States and its allies retain their military superiority to all potential adversaries. There is no need to threaten to use nuclear weapons to deter or respond to any plausible conventional attack. In the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, the United States declared that the United States would not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are in compliance with their non-proliferation obligations.

It considered, but did not adopt, a policy that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack. It rejected “sole purpose” primarily because of concerns about allies. But the NPR pledged to strengthen conventional capabilities and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attack, with the objective of making deterrence of nuclear attack on the US and its allies the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons.

Sole-Purpose, Extended Deterrence, and the Nuclear Umbrella

Most people consider “sole purpose” to be essentially the same as no-first-use, because if the only purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter the use of nuclear weapons by others, then there is no reason to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons first. With a policy of no-first-use or sole-purpose, the United States would use or threaten to use nuclear weapons only in retaliation to a nuclear attack on the US or its allies, such as Japan.

Related concepts are “extended deterrence” and “nuclear umbrella.” In both cases, the idea is that United States can extend the protection of its nuclear arsenal to allies, such as Japan, South Korea, and NATO—that the United States can deter attacks on its allies by threatening to retaliate with nuclear weapons.

But there are two kinds of extended deterrence or nuclear umbrellas, and much of the confusion about no-first-use arises because of a failure to clearly distinguish between the two.

The first type of extended deterrence is deterrence of nuclear attack. In this case, the United States deters nuclear attack on Japan and other allies by threatening nuclear retaliation. This would not be affected in any way by no-first-use, because the United States would use nuclear weapons only after an adversary had already used nuclear against an ally. The U.S. nuclear umbrella would continue to protect Japan against nuclear attack by North Korea or China.

The second type is deterrence of conventional attack. This was the version of extended deterrence practiced by the United States during the Cold War, in which the United States attempted to deter Soviet invasion of western Europe (or a North Korean invasion of South Korea) by threatening to respond with nuclear weapons. This form of extended deterrence is much less credible, particularly with regard to Russia or China, because the United States would be threatening to start a nuclear war with a country that had the capacity to retaliate with nuclear weapons and to destroy U.S. cities.

No First Use and Japan

That brings us to today. Looking forward, what should Japan's attitude be on a U.S. policy of no first use?

First, Japan has reason to be concerned about the possibility of nuclear attack by North Korea, and perhaps by China or Russia, but the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal is a highly effective deterrent against such an attack. This aspect of the nuclear umbrella would not be diminished in any way if the United States adopted a policy of no first use. U.S. threats to use nuclear weapons in retaliation for nuclear attacks on Japan are highly credible, because Japan is a very close ally and the U.S. has military bases and over 100,000 troops and dependents based in Japan.

Second, opposition to no first use is not compatible with support for nuclear disarmament. As I noted above, no-first-use is equivalent a "sole purpose" declaration. If the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter to use of nuclear weapons by others, then it follows logically that a country would be willing to give up its nuclear weapons if it could be sure that all other countries had done so. If

no other countries had nuclear weapons, there would be no need to have nuclear weapons to deter their use by others.

But if Japan believes that the United States must be willing to threaten the first-use of nuclear weapons, it is saying that nuclear weapons are needed to deter more than nuclear attack. Even if nuclear weapons were eliminated, these other reasons would still exist. In opposing no first use, Japan is opposing the principle of nuclear disarmament.

Some might say this is not true, because there are other conditions for nuclear disarmament, such as Japan facing no serious security threats. But saying that we can have nuclear disarmament when all countries are secure and content to live in peace is the same as saying that nuclear disarmament is impossible.

Third, opposition to no first use weakens nonproliferation. The United States and its allies are by far the strongest military alliance in the world. The United States alone spends four times more than China, nine times more than Russia, and 80 times more than North Korea on defense; the U.S. and its allies together account for over 70 percent of world military spending, almost four times more than all adversaries and potential adversaries combined.

Add to this the fact that Japan is an island and is much easier defend than Germany was during the Cold War. If Japan believes that the United States must resort to the first-use or threat of first-use of nuclear weapons to defend it against a non-nuclear attack, what message does this send to all other countries? Countries that are weaker and harder to defend would have even more need of nuclear weapons. A policy of no first use would strengthen nonproliferation efforts; opposing no first use weakens those efforts.

The Government of Japan no doubt believes that maintaining the option of nuclear first use by the United States provides some measure of deterrence against conventional attack on Japan. The key question is how much deterrence it provides, and what is the price of this deterrence. Nuclear deterrence of conventional attack is not cost-free, because such threats lack credibility. As we saw in Europe during the Cold War, actions to increase the credibility of nuclear threats have consequences, such as increasing the likelihood of nuclear war. It would be far better to strengthen conventional defenses so that there was no reason to resort to nuclear use, and to provide for a more credible deterrent.

Scenarios for Nuclear First Use

What is most lacking in discussions about no first use is consideration of specific scenarios. What, exactly, are the scenarios for which Japan believes that the threat of first use of nuclear weapons would be a powerful deterrent, or actual first use of nuclear weapons would be necessary to defend Japan?

Perhaps most likely conflict scenario is with China is in the Senkaku Islands. Both sides might send warships and fighter aircraft, fire warning shots, followed by armed conflict. What role does Japan imagine that U.S. nuclear weapons might have in deterring or responding to such a conflict?

Certainly Japan does not imagine that the United States would actually *use* nuclear weapons to defend Japanese claims to uninhabited pieces of rock—for example, to attack Chinese ships or airbases involved in the conflict. This would be so disproportionate as to consolidate world opinion against the United States and Japan. And if the United States and Japan believe—as they should—that there is no meaningful use for nuclear weapons in such a conflict, then how can the threat to use nuclear weapons in defense of the Senkaku Islands be credible? But if the threat is not credible, it cannot be an effective deterrent.

A second scenario is a North Korean attack. As I have already noted, a U.S. nuclear response to a nuclear attack by North Korea on Japan would not be affected by a policy of no first use, and the likelihood of nuclear retaliation by the United States should deter a nuclear attack by North Korea, because it is a highly credible threat. But North Korea might launch other attacks—attacks with conventionally-armed missiles or special operations forces, or cyberattacks that cripple Japan's economy. How does Japan imagine that the United States could use nuclear weapons in such a scenario?

Nuclear weapons are not needed to destroy the North Korean bases from which these attacks are being launched. If the United States decided to use nuclear weapons first against North Korea, it would have to be supremely confident that it could destroy all of North Korea's nuclear weapons and its capacity to deliver them against South Korea or Japan. Would Japan want the United States to use nuclear weapons first against North Korea, if doing so could prompt a North Korean nuclear attack against Tokyo? I don't think so. And if the United States and Japan do not believe that it would make sense to use nuclear weapons first,

then the threat to do so cannot be a credible deterrent to non-nuclear aggression by North Korea.

As a final scenario, Japan might get drawn into a war between the United States and China, perhaps over the defense of Taiwan or in response to Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Because the United States would use air and naval bases in Japan to support its military operations against China, China might attack these bases with conventionally armed missiles. Would Japan want the United States to use nuclear weapons first in this scenario? If so, on what targets? Several Chinese missile bases deploy both nuclear- and conventionally-armed missiles; a U.S. attack on a Chinese nuclear base could be interpreted by China as the leading edge of a first-strike designed to eliminate China's nuclear capability. China has pledged not to use nuclear weapons first—a pledge that most analysts believe China takes seriously. But they have also promised to retaliate in the event of a nuclear attack. Would Japan want the United States to respond to a conventional Chinese attack on bases in Japan with nuclear weapons, possibly triggering Chinese nuclear retaliation against Japan? If the answer is “no,” then threats to do so are not credible and they have little deterrent value.

Japan might imagine that vague references to nuclear weapons, such as an American president announcing that “all options are on the table,” or veiled threats, such as moving U.S. nuclear-capable aircraft to the region, might deter China or North Korea. But China and North Korea are well aware that the U.S. has nuclear weapons; there is no need to make explicit threats. Anything that would be interpreted by them—or by Japan—as a nuclear threat is dangerous because it can create a commitment trap, in which the United States and Japan believe that they have to follow through with a nuclear response, even if they believe it was unwise and might trigger a catastrophe, because otherwise their prior threats would be exposed as a bluff and the credibility of the United States would be damaged forever after.

Conventional Preparation for Conventional War

The fact that nuclear threats cannot deter most conventional attacks, and that there is no sensible use for nuclear weapons in response for such attacks, does not mean that conventional attacks cannot be deterred or prevented, or that the United States is not committed to do so.

The United States and Japan must plan on deterring and defeating conventional aggression through conventional means. It cannot and should not rely on the magic of a nuclear umbrella, because the umbrella will not be effective under these circumstances.

A pledge of no-first-use by the United States would not signal any reduction in the commitment of the United States to the security of Japan. Instead, by recognizing that nuclear weapons cannot deter most non-nuclear attacks, and by taking steps to acquire the conventional capabilities required to deter and respond to them, the security of both countries would be enhanced.