

# Japan's nuclear doublethink is getting harder to defend

Japan's defense posture has long relied on doublethink.

How else can you explain the nation's ability to simultaneously be devoutly opposed to atomic weapons, while sitting safely underneath the U.S. nuclear umbrella?

Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi faced those contradictions head-on recently when he referred to shifting attitudes toward such arms by countries like France and Finland. He told an interviewer that Tokyo must also "discuss all policies, without any taboos."

From the reaction, you might have thought he called on the country to spin up a Manhattan Project of its own, instead of merely advocating for an open discussion. China, Russia and North Korea — all in possession of nuclear arsenals — blasted the remarks. Coming ahead of the 81st anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the comments were quickly condemned. Nihon Hidankyo, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning atomic bomb survivors' organization, dubbed his suggestion "out of the question." Hiroshima Gov. Mika Yokota has declared that the world was in "a crisis where the nuclear taboo might be broken."

Opposing the use of the bomb is a norm that should, of course, remain intact. But Japan must dispense with the idea that merely discussing the possibility of having a debate is controversial.

That conversation doesn't mean adoption. While some advocate for Tokyo acquiring its own nuclear weapons, in the short term there's near-zero possibility; it's just too politically sensitive in the only country to have ever suffered nuclear attack.

Japan's three non-nuclear principles, adopted by then-Prime Minister Eisaku Sato in 1967, are nonbinding guidelines that say the nation will not possess, produce or permit the introduction of nuclear weapons into its territory. With his frequent references to Finland, which recently lifted its own ban on allowing such arms on its land, what Koizumi is seeking to do is move the Overton window on the third of those.

The principles are worthy goals, as is Japan's commitment to eliminating nuclear arms. They're also hypocritical: The reality is that Japan is not a

country that rejects the nuclear deterrent, but is instead one protected by it, even as it maintains political rituals that keep it at arm's length.

Tokyo is deeply dependent on the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Its own defense strategy notes that “in dealing with the threat of nuclear weapons, U.S. extended deterrence, *with nuclear deterrence at its core*, is essential” (italics mine). In talks this June, Washington explicitly reaffirmed its commitment to defending its ally with the full range of capabilities, including nuclear.

It is getting harder to explain why those weapons are indispensable to protecting Japan while simultaneously arguing that they are morally and politically unacceptable to have in the country itself. And in today's security environment, it's harder still to rationalize why just talking about them should be beyond the pale.

The time for these postwar shibboleths has passed. One reason to accelerate such discussions is U.S. plans to deploy nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles on Virginia-class attack submarines in the next decade, as Shizuka Kuramitsu, a nuclear weapons research analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, noted recently. Such vessels frequently call at Japanese ports. Both Tokyo and Washington want Japan to increase its contribution to regional security, and the flakiness of the Trump administration is one reason why Japan must, in the near term, bind the U.S. closer and boost both sides' dependence on the other.

Japan has made much progress in modernizing its defense posture, as Koizumi noted. It has abandoned a spending cap of 1% of gross domestic product and dismantled self-imposed export controls that have stunted the defense industry. But, as he also remarked, the world is moving faster still. China, Russia and North Korea want to see Tokyo continue to limit its own power. Domestic taboos only aid their goals, while doing nothing to rein in those countries' own growing nuclear arsenals.

At anniversary events for Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said that her administration maintains the three principles, but sidestepped questions about how far that will extend into the future. Before becoming premier, she called for a debate over allowing nuclear sharing, that is, placing U.S. weapons in Japan.

Expect more blowback and complaints about “neo-militarism” if, as expected, she includes the possibility of debating the third principle in an earlier-than-scheduled update of the country's three defense documents later this year. But keep in mind that Shigeru Ishiba, arguably the most left-leaning Liberal Democratic Party prime minister of recent times and one welcomed by Beijing, also called for nuclear sharing in Asia shortly before becoming leader.

The outcome of the debate shouldn't be a fait accompli. There are lots of arguments against possessing nuclear weapons or allowing U.S. arms on Japanese soil. But if so, the argument should be won through discussion, rather than being declared off-limits before both sides have been considered.

Lost in the fuss over Koizumi's remarks was his most important point: That Japan can't let fear of how others might react determine what it's allowed to talk about. The country's nuclear deterrence is already outsourced; the boundaries of its debate shouldn't be.

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