



The super weapon, the paper tiger and Godzilla: a trilateral dialogue on nuclear weapons

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Received: 18 September 2020 / Accepted: 31 October 2020 / Published online: 18 November 2020
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Abstract

The United States, China, and Japan responded to the Cold War with three distinct orientations towards nuclear weapons. The US decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the product of a mentality that did not distinguish between nuclear weapons and conventional weapons. A non-nuclear China refused to capitulate in the face of repeated US nuclear threats, but these were terrifying experiences that prompted China to develop its own nuclear weapons. Japan responded to being the only nation attacked with nuclear weapons by positioning itself as a leading advocate for nuclear disarmament while simultaneously and surreptitiously collaborating with its attacker to prevent Japan from being struck again. The pattern of interaction that developed between these three nations inhibits progress towards nuclear arms control and disarmament. Changing that pattern by facilitating a more equitable trilateral dialogue on nuclear weapons may remove this inhibition.

Keywords Nuclear weapons · Extended deterrence · China · Japan · United States · Nuclear disarmament · Nuclear arms control

1 Introduction

The United States, China and Japan need a more equitable way to discuss nuclear weapons issues. The old Cold War began in East Asia and the unresolved problems of that war appear to be fermenting a second one. The division of Korea and rise of China continue to generate tensions that inform military planning and could precipitate a conflict. Current behavior, which is primarily determined by the United States and China, leaves open the possibility that nuclear weapons may be used in such a conflict. A more active and independent Japanese voice on nuclear weapons issues could alter the current behavior of the United States and China. A more equitable dialogue between the United States, China and Japan could help prevent both

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nuclear weapons states from starting or escalating a nuclear war, and help forestall a new nuclear arms buildup in the region.

These three nations responded to the Cold War with three distinct orientations towards nuclear weapons. The US decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the product of a mentality that does not distinguish between nuclear weapons and conventional weapons. Such a mentality recognizes a quantitative difference but not a qualitative one. Today, the United States still prepares to use nuclear weapons to fight and win wars, just like any other weapon, except that their destructive power make them a kind of super weapon used with an added degree of discretion. The United States asserts the right to use nuclear weapons first and believes it can control the escalation of any nuclear war it might start. For these reasons, the United States invests in maintaining a large nuclear arsenal that is more diverse and more modern than the arsenals of its rivals.

A non-nuclear China refused to capitulate in the face of US nuclear threats during the Korean War and during the Taiwan Strait Crisis of the 1950s. But these were terrifying experiences that prompted China to develop its own nuclear weapons. Unlike the United States, China believes that nuclear weapons are a paper tiger that cannot be used to fight and win wars. China recognizes that nuclear weapons are qualitatively different from conventional ones. Nuclear weapons can only be used as a form of psychological intimidation. Possessing nuclear weapons therefore frees Chinese leaders from that intimidation. To maintain this freedom, China does not need to prepare to use nuclear weapons first or worry about the size or capabilities of the nuclear arsenals of its adversaries. It only needs to feel assured those adversaries know that China can retaliate if attacked first. Chinese strategists assume this knowledge will prevent any opponent, including the United States, from attacking China first. Having accomplished this, Chinese leaders believe they can, if necessary, prosecute a conventional war without undue concern it will escalate to the nuclear level.

Japan is the only nation to experience a nuclear attack. It responded to the Cold War by simultaneously bearing witness to the horrors of nuclear war while collaborating with its attacker to prevent Japan from being struck again. Japan positioned itself as a leading advocate for nuclear disarmament while allowing its protector to use Japan as a base for nuclear operations in Asia. Japanese officials rejected acquiring nuclear weapons. But they also encouraged the United States to project the threat of nuclear use in Japan's defense. Their support for nuclear disarmament was public, but the full extent of their support for US nuclear weapons policies was not. Government officials hid that support from the Japanese public because an overwhelming majority of Japanese view nuclear weapons as a grave physical and moral danger—an uncontrollable monster—whose very existence threatens not only Japan but the entire world.

There is a well-developed history of bilateral interaction between China and the United States that has shaped the course of US and Chinese nuclear weapons policies. Japan has been a quiet but influential observer of this US-centric pattern of interaction, which eschews independent discussions between China and Japan.

So little has changed over so many decades that it seems clear maintaining this pattern of interaction offers little hope of arresting current trends that could lead to a new nuclear buildup in the region. Stirring things up by bringing the three parties

together on an equal footing may not guarantee a different outcome, but it does guarantee a departure from a failing status quo. In that difference lies a possibility for corrective change.

2 Remembering the dawn of the nuclear era

If we define a ‘cold war’ as “an extremely unfriendly relationship between countries, which is expressed not through fighting but through political pressure and threats,” then the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union began at the Potsdam Conference in 1945 (Cambridge 2020). That is an even more appropriate point if we associate the Cold War with nuclear weapons.

US president Harry S. Truman delayed the meeting so he could confront Stalin after the first test of the atom bomb. He viewed it as his “ace in the hole” in negotiations over the post-war world: negotiations that might have been less contentious if the bomb were not a factor (Truman 1945a). Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin’s rush to enter the Pacific War after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was another early indicator of the influence of nuclear weapons on the behavior of both sides. In that sense, the Cold War in Asia began before the Second World War had ended.

Stalin’s decision to enter the Pacific War early had significant consequences. Truman and Stalin had reached an understanding on post-war China at Potsdam (Truman 1945b). But the resumption of the Chinese civil war not long after Japan’s surrender seriously undermined US confidence in Soviet intentions in Asia (OSD 2011). It also clouded US perceptions of the Chinese revolution. Most US officials did not see Chinese leader Mao Zedong as an independent actor but as Stalin’s agent. They imagined the Chinese revolution was imposed by external force rather than an outcome of China’s domestic economic, political and cultural circumstances.

These misperceptions informed Truman’s decision to protect Taiwan at the outset of the Korean conflict. In January 1950, Truman announced that the United States would end its involvement in the Chinese civil war (Truman 1950a). But in June, after Korean leader Kim Il-sung began his attempt to unify the Korean peninsula by force, Truman reversed course, linking the domestic conflict in Korea to the domestic conflict in China. He identified communism in general as the enemy in a US announcement of intent to intervene in both countries simultaneously (Truman 1950b). This was a seminal moment in the Cold War in Asia, and the divisions it solidified remain the root cause of the two most serious political and military problems in East Asia today.

Japan was still under US military occupation at the start of the Korean conflict. Truman had anticipated a significant drawdown of US forces, but that changed in June 1950. US military bases in Japan were used to prosecute the US-led United Nations military intervention in Korea. The US-Japan security treaty of 1951 allowed the United States to keep its military bases in Japan “to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security in the Far East.” This provision served as a justification for the initial introduction of US nuclear weapons into Japanese territory. It was retained in the 1960 revision of the treaty, compelling Japan

to acquiesce to US requests to allow US nuclear weapons to continue to transit Japan. Later, US negotiators used the presence of nuclear weapons on US-occupied Okinawa as a bargaining chip to force Japanese concessions on the continued use of US bases on the island for military purposes unrelated to the defense of Japan (Nakashima 2016).

In the spring of 1946, after US efforts to get the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to disarm and form a coalition government with the Nationalist Party failed, US journalist Anna Louise Strong asked Mao Zedong about the future of his party and its relationship with the Soviets. She worried about the impact of the atomic bomb. Mao told her that although he recognized the bomb was “a weapon of mass slaughter,” it was also “a paper tiger, which the US reactionaries use to scare people” (Mao 1946).

Mao’s views would soon be tested. Chinese troops sent to the border with Korea began to worry they would be attacked with US nuclear weapons. As US forces advanced towards the Chinese border, CCP leaders discussed the possibility of US nuclear attacks against Chinese cities. These discussions weighed heavily on PRC debates about intervening in Korea to push US forces back and to save Kim’s government (Sun 2013). In the end, they decided US nuclear weapons could not be used on the battlefield without substantial risk to US forces and that atomic attacks against Chinese cities were unlikely because they would invite international condemnation (Sun 2013). Truman threatened to use nuclear weapons but never followed through. This experience validated Mao’s perception that US threats to use nuclear weapons could be treated with due skepticism as a form of psychological intimidation.

The United States explicitly challenged China’s “paper tiger” narrative when it threatened to use nuclear weapons against China again in March 1955 (Abel 1955). The United States thought it could make the threat of nuclear use more credible by introducing the idea of “limited” nuclear war using “smaller” and more “precise” weapons (Baldwin 1955). Even though China had no nuclear weapons at the time, it was allied with the Soviet Union. Many other nations, including most US allies, feared any US nuclear use against China, no matter how limited, might trigger a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. They successfully pressured the United States to negotiate with China (Kulacki 2020). The negotiating period gave US President Dwight D. Eisenhower time to reassess whether using nuclear weapons was helpful in resolving the crisis. He decided it was not and made no new nuclear threats (Kulacki 2020). Once again, Mao’s initial perception of the limited utility of nuclear “blackmail” was validated.

China demonstrated it could successfully stand up to US nuclear threats. Yet, its leaders still decided to develop their own nuclear weapons. They justified the decision by saying they were “protecting the Chinese people from US threats to launch a nuclear war.” They also said they still believed nuclear weapons were a paper tiger and that “China is not developing nuclear weapons because it believes in their omnipotence nor because it intends to use them” (PRC MFA 1964). Taken together, these two statements suggest that the purpose of China’s nuclear arsenal is to free its leaders, and its people, from the fear of nuclear attack. Chinese nuclear weapons appear to be fulfilling more of a psychological need than a strictly military one.

At the dawn of the nuclear era, both China and Japan were compelled to react to US decisions about nuclear weapons. As an adversary, China sought to negate the negative psychological effects of US nuclear threats and free itself from any constraints those threats might impose on Chinese decision-making. As an ally with very little control over its national defense, Japan was compelled to acquiesce to US decisions that the Japanese public opposed by overwhelming majorities. Japanese officials mitigated the damage by hiding them. After China acquired its own nuclear weapons, those same officials were then compelled to confront the question of whether US promises of protection from a nuclear attack could be trusted. That debate was also kept from the Japanese public.

These initial conditions established habits of mind and behavior that influenced the development of all three sides of the triangle of nuclear relations between the United States, China and Japan.

3 China and the United States

The initial US response to China's nuclear test was to claim it was nothing to worry about and that the United States would continue to monitor China's program. The United States promised that whatever progress China might make in developing nuclear weapons, US nuclear strength would always remain greater. The United States also assured Japan and other allies that Chinese nuclear weapons would never deter the United States from coming to their defense (Johnson 1964). These three basic US commitments organized the US government's long-term approach to China's nuclear weapons program. US observers collected and assessed information on Chinese capabilities, US policymakers invested in maintaining US superiority, and US diplomats interpreted new developments for Japan and other US allies.

Meeting these commitments does not require an understanding of why China developed nuclear weapons or why it continues to improve its nuclear forces. The United States focuses almost all of its attention on Chinese capabilities rather than Chinese intentions. US interest in how China thinks about nuclear weapons is confined to questions about how and when China might use them. US intelligence estimates from the 1960s indicate that many in the US government were convinced China sought nuclear weapons for aggressive purposes. Even those who argued China was only seeking a deterrent considered that deterrent a serious threat to US interests (Burr 2020). To this day, even the most progressive US officials, despite extensive interaction with Chinese officials and experts, do not take Chinese declarations of intent seriously, particularly the declaration that China will never use nuclear weapons first (Carroll 2015). US officials still assume China intends to use its nuclear weapons for the worst possible ends.

The question of no first use has been a sticking point in low-level semi-official talks between China and the United States. For more than a decade, Chinese representatives have been asking the United States for a commitment not to use nuclear weapons first in the event of a military conflict between the two countries. They were willing to accept a private assurance since they understood the United States government might find it difficult to commit to no first use publicly.

China has never made no first use a prerequisite for participation in international nuclear arms control negotiations. But it has made it clear that a US commitment to no first use is essential for progress in bilateral talks. From China's point of view, the only legitimate purpose of nuclear weapons is to free a country from the fear of being attacked with nuclear weapons. US unwillingness to accept no first use implies the United States believes nuclear weapons can be used for other purposes; including to fight and win a war with China. US officials complain that China is unwilling to engage in higher-level bilateral talks (Roberts 2016), but the US refusal to meet this one basic Chinese request is a significant disincentive.

The United States is also unwilling to acknowledge or accept vulnerability to Chinese nuclear retaliation. Mutual vulnerability was the cornerstone of strategic stability between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Feeling assured that the United States understands it is vulnerable to Chinese nuclear retaliation is a fundamental objective of China's nuclear weapons program. US unwillingness to admit it is vulnerable to Chinese nuclear retaliation is a clear sign that US nuclear policy towards China is premised on a belief that it remains possible to disarm China in a first strike. US deployments of large numbers of precision-guided conventional munitions on China's periphery, combined with a significant expansion of US missile defense capabilities, is a source of considerable anxiety among Chinese nuclear planners. It creates the possibility of a disarming conventional first strike against China's nuclear forces that would challenge China's interpretation of what constitutes first use. This anxiety is driving Chinese planners to increase the size of China's nuclear force. The more the United States resists accepting vulnerability to Chinese nuclear retaliation, the larger China's nuclear force is likely to become. This pattern of mutually reinforcing negative behavior further reduces the likelihood of a higher-level bilateral dialogue.

One of the reasons the United States refused to accept mutual vulnerability with China is because, in the words of one US official, "That's not something Japan would like to hear" (C-Span 2013). Japanese officials worry that if the United States admitted it was vulnerable to Chinese nuclear retaliation, the US assurance to defend Japan would be less credible. Japan is also opposed to a US no first use declaration. US President Barack Obama was considering declaring no first use during his visit to Hiroshima in 2016. Administration officials familiar with his deliberations told the author—off the record—that when Japanese officials got word of the possibility, they contacted US Secretary of State John Kerry, US Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz and US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, and urged them to dissuade Obama from making such a declaration. A Japanese Foreign Ministry official subsequently confirmed—off the record—that the Japanese embassy initiated discussions with US officials intended to discourage the United States from announcing any changes to US nuclear weapons policy during Obama's visit.

Japan's apparent interest in maintaining US rigidity on no first use and mutual vulnerability appears to be a major obstacle to progress in US–China bilateral nuclear discussions. A trilateral discussion may help all three sides come to an agreement on how to overcome this obstacle.

4 The United States and Japan

US preparations to use nuclear weapons to defend Japan began in the late 1950s. The first time the United States invited Japanese officials to observe these preparations was in an exercise code-named “Fuji” conducted under the auspices of the US Military Assistance Program (Ota 2015). The exercise called for exploding nuclear anti-aircraft weapons in the skies over Japan to protect US military bases from Soviet bombers. Immediately afterwards, the clearly troubled Japanese officers who observed the exercise submitted a list of questions to the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). The questions, and the US responses, have defined the uneasy US–Japan nuclear relationship ever since.

The first question was whether it was appropriate to use nuclear weapons to protect US military bases given their proximity to civilian infrastructure. The JCS said it would use whatever weapons it deemed appropriate and told Japanese officials the nuclear weapons it chose “would be selectively employed to assure minimum damage to the country and its population.” The next question was whether “the free world would sacrifice one of its own countries by means of unrestricted nuclear warfare to gain ultimate victory.” The JCS said that would be “contradictory to the moral and political concepts of the United States.” The third question was whether the United States would allow Japan to have control over the US nuclear weapons deployed in Japan. The JCS refused to commit but left open the possibility of Japanese control if Japan could develop “a capability to employ effectively such weapons.” There were several other questions, but finally the Japanese officers asked the JCS if they would remove US nuclear weapons from Japan and restrict the use of US bases in Japan to conventional operations so that Japan would not become the target of a nuclear attack. The JCS said no (JCS 1957).

Debates over these four issues—Japan’s vulnerability both to foreign nuclear attack and the consequences of US nuclear use in defense of Japan, US decision-making, Japanese control over nuclear use and the desire for a non-nuclear Japan—continue to this day.

The Japanese observers of the US nuclear war exercise also asked, “If Japan were to arm herself with nuclear weapons, could she depend on US support for such a plan?” The JCS said yes, so long as the “scope and phasing” of US support were worked out in negotiations. But political developments in Japan prevented serious Japanese consideration of that possibility. A broad-based anti-nuclear movement began to take hold in the wake of the radiation poisoning of a Japanese fishing vessel caught in the fallout from a US nuclear test (Atomic Bomb Museum 2020). That added to already significant domestic political opposition to the US–Japan security treaty (Kapur 2018). US officials repeatedly expressed concern about Japanese opposition to US nuclear testing (FRUS 1957a) and plans to deploy US nuclear weapons in Japan (FRUS 1957b).

Although Japanese officials yielded to public protests, they also began to seriously consider Japan’s nuclear options after China successfully tested its first nuclear device in October 1964. The Japanese government commissioned

a non-public study on the question of developing nuclear weapons. The study, completed in 1968, was conducted by an independent panel of four university academics who consulted Japanese government officials and industrialists. The panel concluded that while Japan possessed the technical and economic capacity to develop, deploy, and maintain a small nuclear arsenal, “a nuclear weapons program would not strengthen Japanese security.” The country’s population was highly concentrated in a small number of urban areas that could be easily destroyed by just a few large nuclear warheads delivered by China or other nuclear-armed adversaries. Moreover, the decision to develop nuclear weapons would risk isolating Japan from the international community, thereby limiting Japan’s access to vital natural resources and international trade. The study concluded that the costs of becoming a nuclear power far outweighed the principal benefit, which was to reduce Japan’s reliance on the United States for its national security (UCS 2013a).

There is no indication that the authors of this report were indecisive or felt Japan should prepare to start a nuclear weapons program in the future. In fact, the authors argued it was too late to start, and that the 10-year time gap between the beginning of China’s program and a potential Japanese nuclear weapons program was a serious problem. A Japanese program would raise Chinese anxieties, making war more likely during a lengthy period within which Japan would remain vulnerable to attack before it could acquire an assured ability to retaliate. The longer Japan waited, the longer that period of vulnerability would be. The report does mention the need for Japan to develop the ability to manufacture its own nuclear fuel, including the ability to reprocess spent fuel. But the justification for reprocessing mentioned in the report was not connected to a potential future nuclear weapons program. Instead, reprocessing was needed to address the problem of access to sufficient long-term supplies of uranium, which Japan would have to import from abroad. Reprocessing was deemed necessary for energy security, not physical security (UCS 2013a).

Japan’s early anti-nuclear and pacifist nationalism was at its most effective when it forced a reluctant United States to return Okinawa to Japan. The United States occupied the island it captured during the war at considerable cost. The JCS lobbied hard to keep it (FRUS 1963). Okinawa had grown into a massive hub for US military operations in Asia and it played an indispensable role in prosecuting the war in Vietnam (FRUS 1966). Since the mid-1950s, the United States had steadily built up a large stockpile of tactical nuclear weapons on the island (Norris et al. 1999). Some of the nuclear-armed missiles deployed there were reportedly prepared to be launched at targets in China during the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis (Tovish 2015).

Japanese public pressure compelled their leaders to demand the United States remove all of the nuclear weapons deployed in Okinawa before returning the island to Japan in 1972. US President Richard Nixon’s rapprochement with China that same year, and the winding down of military operations in Vietnam, made the return of Okinawa and the removal of the nuclear weapons stored there less of a problem. By the mid-1980s, US concern about the need for extended nuclear deterrence capabilities in East Asia was so low it was willing to allow the Soviet Union to maintain nuclear-armed intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) in Siberia in order

to reach an agreement on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987. Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone had to travel to the United States to plead with President Reagan to get US negotiators to take that option off the table (Jones 1990).

The Japanese leadership revisited the question of acquiring nuclear weapons in 1995. North Korea was showing signs it would become a nuclear weapons state. At the same time, the United States was pressing for a permanent extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Once again, the Japanese government commissioned a non-public study led by a panel of experts. The panel believed that a Japanese decision to acquire nuclear weapons would lead to the destruction of the present nonproliferation regime and their alliance with the United States. It argued the economic costs were high and would be more keenly felt because a nuclear Japan would also create domestic political unrest and regional instability. The authors of the study argued, “It is questionable whether there is any value for a trading nation that depends on the stability of the international society to try to secure its survival and protect its interests with its own nuclear weapons. It would more likely undermine the basis of its own survival.” The expert panel concluded that neither a nuclear North Korea nor a large-scale war between the United States and China would alter its view that “the nuclear option is not a favorable one for Japan” (UCS 2013b).

It is difficult to assess whether Japanese government views on acquiring nuclear weapons have changed since the 1995 assessment was completed. Whatever deliberations may have taken place are carefully hidden from the public. The most recent disclosure was made during hearings conducted by a US congressional commission in 2009 (USIP 2009). Japanese officials presented a document to the commissioners detailing the Japanese government’s views on the role of nuclear weapons in the defense of Japan (MOFA 2009). The document indicates the Obama administration agreed with the Japanese Foreign Ministry’s request to state that nuclear weapons are “the core of Japan–US security arrangements.” One important recommendation in the document that the Obama administration adopted was the establishment of an official “Extended Deterrence Dialogue (EDD)” between the United States and Japan (MOFA 2020). The content of the dialogue is very closely held, but some of the participants have disclosed information indicating the role of nuclear weapons is a central topic in the talks (C-Span 2013).

Hand-written notes in the document taken by the commission staff indicate one potential change being discussed in this new dialogue is an adjustment to Japan’s three non-nuclear principles that would allow for the re-deployment of US tactical nuclear weapons in Okinawa. In an interview in Washington DC in November 2009, Takeo Akiba, who chaired the dialogue for several years and is now the Japanese Vice Foreign Minister, said that his long term aim was to establish a “NATO-like” relationship where Japanese forces are trained to deliver US nuclear weapons. He also said he believes it is necessary for Japan to have the authority to determine how and when those nuclear weapons might be used (Kulacki 2009). The hand-written notes in the document given to the congressional commission indicate Japanese concerns about China are behind these requests for changes in US-Japan alliance nuclear weapons policies.

5 Japan and China

The most important aspect of the nuclear relationship between China and Japan is that China has nuclear weapons and Japan does not. The sole purpose of China's nuclear weapons is to free Chinese leaders from the fear of nuclear attack and the limitations that might impose on Chinese decision-making. China has also declared it will never use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states. So, the nuclear problem between Japan and China is in fact US nuclear weapons and Japan's insistence they constitute "the core" of the US-Japan security alliance. Japan wants the United States to threaten nuclear use against China. Japan refuses to support a US no first use policy and refuses to accept US vulnerability to Chinese nuclear retaliation. Some Japanese officials also appear to be lobbying their US counterparts to re-deploy US nuclear weapons in Japan, to equip and train Japanese forces to deliver them and to allow the Japanese leadership to determine when they are used.

Why do Japanese officials place such a high value on credible US threats to attack China, first if necessary, with nuclear weapons? Vice Foreign Minister Akiba, a prominent and perhaps decisive internal voice on nuclear issues, believes that China's possession of nuclear weapons gives it a blanket advantage over every contentious aspect of Japan–China relations, from trade negotiations to the dispute over sovereign claims to the Senkaku or Diaoyu islands (Kulacki 2009). He also believes that Chinese knowledge of Japanese authorization to threaten and use US nuclear weapons would mitigate Japan's supposed disadvantage. Presumably, Mr. Akiba is not alone in these beliefs, but because this type of conversation, if made public, would invite political condemnation, the extent of Japanese political support for this kind of thinking is difficult for outsiders to assess.

Akiba's perspective on the role of nuclear weapons in Japan–China relations is also difficult for an outside observer to understand. One can speculate its origins lie in deep-rooted historical, psychological and cultural factors. But the pervasive use of US concepts and terminology in both the 1995 study and the 2009 memo suggest the Japanese officials pushing these strongly pro-nuclear defense policies may have been heavily influenced by their US interlocutors. The first US director of the US-Japan Extended Deterrence Dialogue described it as an opportunity to teach the Japanese about how US extended nuclear deterrence is supposed to work (C-Span 2013).

The 1995 study contained a number of other interesting Japanese perspectives on China's nuclear weapons program. The authors argued China decided to acquire nuclear weapons because it could not rely on the Soviet nuclear umbrella in the same way Japan relies on the nuclear umbrella of the United States. They also assumed lack of resources limited the size of China's nuclear forces. The authors expressed concern that despite the small size of China's nuclear arsenal, there may come a day when it changes its policy on no first use and attempts to use its nuclear weapons to intimidate Japan and other Asian nations into accepting Chinese claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands or to undertake "continental

shelf development” in disputed waters. One can see in this later assumption the same type of thinking that Mr. Akiba expressed in 2009.

The 1995 report also endorsed the use of tactical nuclear weapons to offset a conventional weapons disadvantage. In 1995, China’s conventional capabilities were still clearly inferior to those of the US-Japan alliance. But today, one can see in the 2009 document presented to the congressional commission, concern exists about increased Chinese conventional capabilities that Japanese officials believe must be offset by US tactical nuclear weapons. Perhaps this is why contemporary Japanese officials cannot accept US vulnerability to Chinese nuclear retaliation if the United States strikes first. They appear concerned that if the United States admits it is vulnerable to Chinese nuclear retaliation, then the value of a threat of US first use of tactical nuclear weapons would not be credible or effective in stopping China from prosecuting a conventional war. In this respect, China and Japan seem to see this aspect of the relationship between conventional and nuclear forces in the same way.

China is more concerned about what Japan might become rather than what it is at present. In 1972, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai told Nixon the Chinese leadership worried about the “militaristic thinking” of a “small number” of Japanese elites (White House 1972). Any indication this type of thinking is on the ascendency in Japan would reconfirm this longstanding Chinese anxiety. This may be why contemporary Chinese leaders react so strongly when Japanese government officials visit the Yasukuni Shrine, which pays homage to the Japanese militarists who invaded and colonized China in the twentieth century (BBC 2013). These concerns influence Chinese interpretations of nuclear-related issues in Japan, particularly Japan’s continued interest in reprocessing nuclear material and the large stores of separated plutonium it makes available for potential use in a future nuclear weapons program (Zhang 2014).

Zhou also told Nixon he recognized the potential for “a new, independent, peaceful and democratic Japan.” Nearly twenty years earlier, Zhou had appealed to that possibility in Bandung during the first Asian-African Conference when he expressed sympathy for the victims of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Prashad 2007). That same year the Chinese government copied a successful Japanese signature campaign calling for an end to nuclear testing, which Zhou highlighted when he expressed concern for the Japanese fishermen poisoned by radioactive fallout.

More recently, however, Chinese diplomats have been far less gracious. As the 70th anniversary of the bombings approached, Japan asked that the final document of Ninth Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) Review Conference contain one sentence inviting world leaders to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After vetoing the idea, China’s Ambassador for Disarmament Affairs added insult to injury. He said, “There are reason why [Hiroshima and Nagasaki] were bombed.” He then accused Japan of having the “ulterior motive” of wanting to “take advantage” of the humanitarian issue (Japan Times 2015).

Those comments deeply offended the overwhelming majority of Japanese who support the elimination of nuclear weapons on humanitarian grounds: the same Japanese who were needed in 1972, and needed now, to make Zhou’s “independent, peaceful and democratic Japan” possible.

6 Imagining the dusk of the nuclear era

There is no question that the effects of nuclear weapons are more grotesque and indiscriminate than the effects of biological and chemical weapons, which are banned by international convention. There is equally little question that nuclear weapons will also be banned by international law in the not too distant future. Biological and chemical weapons were eliminated with the support of nations that possessed them. But the nuclear weapons states did not participate in the negotiation of the Treaty on the Prevention of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which recently obtained the required number of ratifications to enter into force. The treaty gained the enthusiastic support of the majority of non-nuclear weapons states, which came to the justifiable conclusion that the nuclear weapons states had no intention of ever honoring their obligations under the NPT “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament.”

There is no technical justification for the recalcitrance of the nuclear weapons states. There are no technical obstacles associated with the two most prominent steps they need to take to honor their NPT obligations: ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and negotiation of the Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT). The technologies needed for verifiable mutual reductions in the large nuclear arsenals of Russia and the United States are also well within reach. The simple truth is that the nuclear weapons states want to both preserve and continually improve their arsenals. It is also true that many of the so-called umbrella states, especially Japan, seem equally unwilling to let go of their attachment to the bomb.

At the same time, nuclear weapons have not been used since the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki 75 years ago. The paradox of maintaining a strong taboo against nuclear use while at the same time investing enormous fiscal and technical resources in nuclear weapons deserves more careful examination. The only practical way to pursue such an examination is to have an in-depth and innovative discussion where these attachments to nuclear weapons can be explored. A discussion between a state that still views nuclear weapons as a viable means to prosecute and win a war, a nuclear state that does not share this belief and a non-nuclear weapons state still traumatized by being attacked could yield some interesting and unprecedented insights. This is especially true since the three states are enmeshed in a complex security relationship.

Such a discussion is unlikely to begin at the highest levels of government, or even within the three governments at all. The best way to start may be for non-governmental organizations to take the lead. There is more than sufficient scientific and technological knowledge within the non-governmental communities in all three nations to competently advise the potential participants. The greatest difficulty will be finding non-governmental policy professionals whose careers and income are not tied to governmental and corporate stakeholders invested in maintaining the status quo. Recent reports indicating that the US government

and major US defense corporations fund all of the US think tanks that traditionally comment on this issue are an indication this is not a trivial concern (Freeman 2020). Another obstacle will be the reluctance of Chinese non-governmental organizations to engage in a dialogue in which Japan is perceived as an equal and independent participant. All Chinese non-governmental organizations are understandably restrained by their ties to the government sponsors they are required to have under the relevant Chinese laws and regulations.

New voices with fresh perspectives that are not unduly influenced by corporate or government interests are not hard to find. Moreover, they are the most likely to break free of the status quo thinking that has left nuclear security problems in Asia to fester for decades. The simple fact that we are now discussing the possibility of a new Cold War in Asia is ample evidence that the status quo has failed. It may take time for new voices to overcome entrenched ways of thinking about the role of nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons policies in East Asia, but it is long past time to start looking for those voices, creating platforms where they can be heard and listening to what they have to say.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest There is no conflict of interest associated with any of the content of this article.

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