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Japan ready for 'no nukes'

By SHINGO FUKUYAMA and HIROMICHI UMEBAYASHI
 Special to The Japan Times

As the Obama administration contemplates major reductions to its nuclear arsenal, Japan's commitment to nuclear disarmament is being tested as never before.

In his Prague speech on April 5, President Barack Obama said, "We will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy and urge others to do the same." He went on to say, "we will begin the work of reducing our arsenal."

But in between these two landmark pledges he said, "as long as these weapons exist, we will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies."

The goal that Obama articulated of "a world without nuclear weapons" was overwhelmingly supported by the Japanese public. Yet, the way the Japanese government views U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, otherwise referred to as the "nuclear umbrella," is turning out to be a key sticking point, which may end up blocking progress on nuclear disarmament.

Reportedly, the specific reduction in the role of nuclear weapons that is being contemplated is that they would be retained for only one purpose. Their sole purpose would be to deter the use of other people's nuclear weapons. This is sometimes referred to as a policy of "No First Use" (NFU).

The Japanese government has long taken a different undeclared view that the U.S. nuclear umbrella should also cover potential threats from biological weapons, chemical weapons and even conventional weapons.

At a press conference Aug. 9, on the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, Prime Minister Taro Aso criticized demands for nuclear powers, including the United States, to pledge not to be the first to use nuclear weapons. He said, "I wonder if that's a realistic way to ensure Japan's safety." Likewise, Foreign Ministry officials have repeatedly made unofficial comments opposing NFU.

The key test for the vision spelled out by Obama in Prague is the Nuclear

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Posture Review, now being prepared. We understand that a substantial reduction in the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategy is being considered.

It is distressing to note that Japan is being used as an excuse to prevent Washington from making an important policy change that would be a step forward toward a world without nuclear weapons. Some argue that a reduction in the role of nuclear weapons would weaken the U.S.-Japan security relationship.

Others, for example former U.S. Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, even suggest that Japan might choose to acquire its own nuclear weapons.

In fact, there are signs of greater flexibility than these people acknowledge. It is widely predicted that there will be a change of government after the Aug. 30 elections and that the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), currently the largest opposition party, will win. The attitude to NFU by the DPJ and its potential coalition partners is likely to be quite different from the LDP.

DPJ secretary general Katsuya Okada has suggested that Japan work with Washington to achieve a NFU policy. In response to a questionnaire sent recently to Japanese political parties by disarmament nongovernment organizations, the DPJ said that NFU was an issue that should be discussed with the U.S. government.

The Social Democratic Party, a potential coalition party in a new government, and the Japanese Communist Party also supported an NFU policy. Even New Komeito, which is a member of the current government, supported an NFU policy if there is an international consensus.

Opposition to NFU within the LDP is by no means universal. So the picture of monolithic Japanese opposition to NFU, presented by some U.S. commentators, is really quite misleading.

As for the argument that Japan will go nuclear if Washington reduces the number and missions of U.S. nuclear forces, this is nonsense. Japanese political leaders are intelligent enough to know that going nuclear would have huge ramifications that would not be in Japan's national interest. No political party in Japan supports acquiring nuclear weapons.

Sixty-four years after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the anti-nuclear sentiment in Japan remains strong. Over 1,400 local authorities (about 80 percent) have made nuclear-free pledges. These local authorities represent the spirit of nuclear abolition in Japanese society far better than the LDP-led central government.

If the Obama administration moves decisively to get rid of "the most dangerous legacy of the Cold War." the joy of the vast majority of the Japanese people will overwhelm the reservations of an unrepresentative clique in the Japanese bureaucratic system. So, Mr. Obama, act boldly. Grasp the opportunity that is before you. Japan is ready.

Shingo Fukuyama is secretary general of the Japan Congress Against A- and H-Bombs (Gensuikin). Hiromichi Umabayashi is special adviser to Peace Depot, a nonprofit organization.

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Feelings of (in)security

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- The only thing I've signed up for online is free email.
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