

Strategic Stability in Northeast Asia: A Japanese perspective

Akira Igata

Pacific Forum, CSIS / Keio University

Prepared for the presentation at:

Monterey Workshop on “Strategic Stability in East Asia: Transition and Change”

Middlebury Institute for International Studies at Monterey

February 22-25, 2016

A caveat: The multilateral, asymmetric nature of strategic balance in Northeast Asia

“Strategic stability” is a concept coined during the Cold War, which described a situation where the United States and the Soviet Union had no incentives for a nuclear first strike. However, defining strategic stability in contemporary Northeast Asia is quite difficult, primarily due to its multilateral and asymmetric nature. There are three countries with nuclear weapons in this region:¹ The United States, which provides extended nuclear deterrence to both Japan and the ROK, has 4,760 nuclear warheads; China has 260; and North Korea is estimated to possess 12-27. This multilateral, asymmetric feature of Northeast Asia’s nuclear balance must be kept in mind when attempting to apply a concept that was developed in a bilateral setting with relatively symmetrical numbers of nuclear weapons.

Realistic and unrealistic scenarios

My perspective on the likely scenario for the future of the strategic balance in Northeast Asia is somewhat unexciting—I see continuation of the status quo as the most realistic outlook. Despite occasional concerns that Japan may start developing its own nuclear weapons, there are numerous reasons to believe otherwise.

It is true that Japan has attained a high level of nuclear latency, defined as “the possession of many or all of the technologies, facilities, materials, expertise (including tacit knowledge), resources and other capabilities necessary for the development of nuclear weapons, without full operational weaponization.”² In addition to capabilities, there have been cases where Japan showed possible intentions for acquiring nuclear weapons as well. Immediately after the first Chinese nuclear weapons test in 1964, Prime Minister Eisaku Sato told US Ambassador to Japan Edwin Reischauer that “it is common sense that we should possess nuclear arms if everyone else does.”³ This led President Lyndon Johnson to reassure Sato that a US nuclear umbrella would be provided for Japan. A few years later, in 1968 and 1970, the Sato cabinet convened secret study groups composed of academics to assess the merits of acquiring nuclear weapons. However, both reports concluded that it would be unwise for Japan to develop nuclear weapons, since this would have a profound negative effect on international politics and substantially decrease Japanese security.⁴

¹ Russia is omitted in this analysis given the nature of this panel being a “strategic triangle.”

² Joseph F. Pilat. “Report of a Workshop on Nuclear Latency.” October 2, 2014. Available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Report--Workshop%20on%20Nuclear%20Latency--20141002.pdf>.

³ George R. Packard. *Edwin O. Reischauer and the American Discovery of Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

⁴ Cabinet Research Office. *Nihon no Kaku Seisaku ni Kansuru Kisoteki Kennkyuu (Sono Ichi): Dokuritsu Kaku Senryoku Sousetsu no Gijyutsuteki, Soshikiteki, Zaiseiteki Kanousei* [Fundamental studies on Japan’s nuclear policy

In the end, the actions taken by the Japanese government have led to a pristine track record in terms of its efforts to promote nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament. Domestically, Japan has long held up its three non-nuclear principles of not possessing, not producing, and not permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons onto its soil. These principles are bolstered by the public's anti-nuclear sentiment, which has been formed through the experience of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Fukushima. Internationally, Japan has been a staunch supporter of the NPT regime. The public has, again, strongly supported this position. The annual Cabinet public opinion survey on diplomacy asks what role Japan should play in the international society, and around 40 percent of the respondents have consistently chosen the "promotion of disarmament and nonproliferation."⁵ Unless the strategic situation alters fundamentally, it is quite unlikely that Japan would shift its policies and acquire nuclear weapons.

Effects of the changing numbers of nuclear weapons to Japan's stability calculations

Japan's long-stated goals of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation have consistently been at odds with the need for Japan to rely on US nuclear extended deterrence for dealing with the risks of high-intensity conflicts. There is currently no consensus on the number of nuclear weapons that would be the absolute minimum necessary in order to maintain credible US extended nuclear deterrence. Furthermore, any decrease in the number of nuclear weapons could be perceived as lowering the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence in the eyes of the deterrent country. Japan is likely to continue its struggle with this dilemma of pursuing nuclear disarmament while pushing for reassurance of the US nuclear umbrella, until the number of US nuclear weapons hits the magic number—at which point, Japan's precarious balancing act will require coordination with the deterrent countries.

These deterrent countries are North Korea and China. North Korea's case requires no justification, but China deserves a brief explanation. In addition to Chinese nuclear and missile capabilities, the Japanese government has increasingly been wary of Chinese intentions. Various actions taken by China during the last decade have fueled this skepticism, for example, anti-satellite weapon (ASAT) testing; cyber attacks; development of anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities, including anti-submarine capabilities; increasingly assertive maritime activities; and so on.

Sugio Takahashi, who is the Deputy Director of the Office of Strategic Planning at the Japanese Ministry of Defense, argues that strategic stability between the United States and China may have undesirable effects on Japan. In a purely bilateral calculation, the US acceptance of mutual vulnerability with China may be instrumental for the United States in increasing arms race

(Part 1): *Technical, organizational, and financial possibilities of the creation of an independent nuclear forces.*] September, 1968. Cabinet Research Office. *Nihon no Kaku Seisaku ni Kansuru Kisoteki Kennkyuu (Sono Ni): Dokuritsu Kaku Senryoku no Senryakuteki, Gaikouteki, Seijiteki Shomondai* [Fundamental studies on Japan's nuclear policy (Part 2): Strategic diplomatic, and political problems related to an independent nuclear forces.] January, 1970.

⁵ For the list of Cabinet opinion surveys on Diplomacy, see: <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/index-gai.html>. On the surprising stability and continuation of foreign policy outlook among the Japanese public, see: Akira Igata and Brad Glosserman. "A Pragmatic Public: Observations of Japan's 2016 Public Opinion Survey on Diplomacy." *PacNet*#30, March 22, 2016.

stability while maintaining a similar level of crisis stability.⁶ If the United States decreases or China increases its nuclear arsenal to the point where a state of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) is perceived to exist between these two countries, then the “stability-instability paradox” may surface between the United States and China. This paradox is described succinctly by Robert Jervis in the following fashion: “To the extent that the military balance is stable at the level of all-out nuclear war, it will become less stable at lower levels of violence.”⁷

As the recipient of extended nuclear deterrence, Japan stands to suffer the most from this “stability-instability paradox” since under the current strategic environment, the most likely flashpoints for low-intensity conflicts to occur are over territorial disputes or maritime boundaries, both of which concern the Japanese national interest for more than that of the United States. In short, Takahashi touches upon an important fact: that as the United States and China approach MAD, we may start to see an increase in low-intensity conflict that primarily involves Japan.

Taku Ishikawa, a professor at the National Defense Academy, agrees with Takahashi but takes the position that the stability-instability paradox has in fact already begun to manifest itself.⁸ He cites the North Korean missile launches (April 2009), the sinking of the Cheonan (March 2010), and the shelling of the Yeonpyeong islands (November 2010), as well as China’s increasingly aggressive maritime activities as evidence for this increase in low-intensity conflict. Ishikawa also notes that a dual asymmetric vulnerability has caused Northeast Asia to have a high degree of anomalous crisis stability. Namely, North Korean vulnerability towards US nuclear weapons is offset by the vulnerabilities of US allies such as Japan, ROK, and Taiwan.⁹ The implication of this assumption is that efforts by Japan and the United States to strengthen their ballistic missile defense (BMD) cooperation will be instrumental in decreasing the vulnerability of Japan, but could also undermine this anomalous crisis stability in the region, which may have been a contributing factor to the absence of any high-intensity conflict in Northeast Asia for the past few decades.

Japanese security policy

If Japan is unlikely to pursue its own nuclear weapons, what security policies might Japan take in order to influence the strategic environment in Northeast Asia? My view is that Japan will likely continue adopting the following two policies, one aimed at high-intensity conflicts and the other focusing on low-intensity conflicts.

⁶ Sugio Takahashi. “Kakuheiki wo Meguru Shomondai to Nihon no Anzen Hoshou: NPR, Shin-START Taisei, ‘Kakuheiki no Nai Sekai,’ Kakudai Yokushi. [Various problems related to nuclear weapons and Japan’s security: NPR, New START framework, ‘world without nuclear weapons,’ and extended deterrence.]” *Kaigai Jijyo*, Vol. 58, No. 7-8 (July-August, 2010): 48.

⁷ Robert Jervis. *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984: 31.

⁸ Taku Ishikawa. “Kaku Gunshuku to Higashi Ajia no Anzen Hoshou [Nuclear Disarmament and Security in East Asia.]” In Center for the Promotion of Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, JIIA, eds. “*Kakuheiki no Nai Sekai*” *ni Muketa Kadai no Kentou* [Reconsidering challenges towards “world without nuclear weapons.”] Contracted research report for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (FY2010). March, 2011: 12-14.

⁹ Taku Ishikawa. “The Japan-US Alliance Facing the Age of Nuclear Disarmament: From ‘Extended Deterrence’ to ‘Regional Deterrence.’” Yuki Tatsumi, ed. *The New Nuclear Agenda: Prospects for US-Japan Cooperation*. Stimson, February 2012. P.26.

High-intensity conflicts

In dealing with high-intensity conflicts, Japan will continue to rely on the US nuclear umbrella. As the US nuclear stockpile decreases, Japan's fears over US decoupling or the "alliance dilemma"¹⁰—questions over whether the United States will risk sacrificing LA for Tokyo—will increase.¹¹ Therefore, constant reassurance on the credibility of US nuclear extended deterrence will be needed from the United States. This assurance is made through various political pronouncements, policy documents, and alliance mechanisms (Japan-US extended deterrence dialogues). Furthermore, the credibility of the US nuclear umbrella is fungible—US credibility in the eyes of Japan can be increased by issues unrelated to nuclear strategy *per se*. For instance, Operation Tomodachi following the Great East Japan Earthquake is widely known to have strengthened the reliability of the United States in the eyes of the Japanese, showing that the United States will be there for them when in need. This importance of continuing to reassure treaty allies seems to be understood by the US policy community as well.¹² In addition to securing reassurance from the United States, Japan will continue to expand its BMD capabilities in dealing with high-intensity conflicts. Japanese experts have repeatedly taken the position that Japan is "uniquely exposed and vulnerable to a North Korean nuclear strike in a Northeast Asian contingency."¹³ This calculation is often based on the fact that North Korea does not yet possess the delivery system to reach the United States, while nuclear weapons are not necessary in attacking ROK. Due to this fear, Japan is likely to expand its BMD cooperation with the United States¹⁴ and possibly deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system¹⁵ as the third prong of its current two-stage missile defense system that uses SM-3 and PAC-3.

Low-intensity conflicts

At the lower end of the conflict escalation spectrum, Japan will rely on conventional capabilities. The Japanese government's increased focus on "gray zone" situations represents this view point. The importance of dealing with gray zone issues have started appearing in government documents since the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) from 2010, authorized under the DPJ government headed by Prime Minister Naoto Kan. Here, the long-standing "Concept of Basic Defense Capability," which has been the basis of Japan's defense policy for over three decades from 1976 until 2010, was replaced by the concept of "dynamic defense" and "dynamic deterrence," which specifically deals with gray zone incidents. After the LDP came back to power, the newly established National Security Council has adopted a document, which is essentially the first-ever national security strategy (NSS) for Japan in December of 2013. The NDPG, which was created concomitant to the NSS, has once again replaced the "Dynamic Defense" concept to "Dynamic Joint Defense Force," which is quite similar with the latter arguably having a stronger emphasis on dealing with gray zone issues. Furthermore, the new

¹⁰ Glenn H. Snyder. "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1984): 461-495.

¹¹ Sugio Takahashi. "Nichi-Bei Doumei ni Okeru Yokushi Taisei [Deterrence posture in Japan-US alliance.]" *Kaigai Jijyo*, Vol. 61, No. 5 (May 2013): 81-82.

¹² Center for Strategic and International Studies. *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025: Capabilities, Presence, and Partnerships*. January 2016: 157-158.

¹³ Brad Glosserman. "Respond and Restrain: Deterrence and Reassurance in Northeast Asia: A Conference Report from the US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Workshop and Simulation." *Issues & Insights*, Vol. 14, No. 16 (July 2014): vi.

¹⁴ Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation. April 27, 2015.

¹⁵ Andy Sharp. "Japan Mulls Thaad Missile Defense System Amid North Korea Threat." *Bloomberg*, November 23, 2015.

Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation (April 27, 2015) and the new security legislation adopted by the LDP in the summer of 2015 all refer to the need for establishing “seamless responses” in order to effectively deal with gray zone situations. It is also worth noting that this is a bipartisan issue—the current DPJ government, which is calling for the adoption of their proposed version of the security-related legislations to replace the ones adopted under the LDP in 2015, also focuses on dealing with gray zone issues.

The concept of “seamless responses” is ubiquitous in the current Japanese strategic, security related documents. The Cabinet decision that changed the government interpretation of the right to collective self-defense in July 2014 is even named “Cabinet Decision on Development of Seamless Security Legislation to Ensure Japan’s Survival and Protect its People.” Seamlessness can be interpreted as having four aspects: (1) Intensity of the conflict; (2) Geographical area; (3) Cooperation with different states (not just the United States, but Australia and beyond); and (4) Cross-domain (cyber, space, etc.).¹⁶

In short, Japan will most likely rely on US extended nuclear deterrence and BMD systems to lower the risks of high-intensity conflicts, while pursuing policies that will allow the SDF to effectively deal with gray zone incidents by improving its ability to “seamlessly respond” to these contingencies.

©Akira Igata, 2016. Do not distribute or quote without permission of the author.

¹⁶ Ken Jimbo. Statement to the Special Committee on Legislation for the Peace and Security of Japan and the International Community. 189th session of the House of Councillors, September 8, 2015: 6-7.