

The history and dualistic position of Japanese leadership towards a world without nuclear weapons

Miyako Kurosaki

Research coordinator

Hiroshima Organization for Global Peace (HOPE)

The international security environment has deteriorated in recent years. The confrontation between the United States and Russia continues and is expanding to new domains including cyberspace and outer space. Growing tension between the US and China is directly impacting security in Northeast Asia. Moreover, dialogues and efforts for nuclear disarmament are stalemated. The world yearns to reduce the risk of nuclear war and for tangible efforts towards nuclear disarmament and the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons.

Japan has enormous potential to lead these efforts toward the elimination of nuclear weapons because it has the dualistic position of being both a victim of nuclear weapons and a nuclear umbrella state. This history of suffering the consequences of nuclear weapons and a position under the US nuclear umbrella place four responsibilities on Japan; international responsibility to share the historic experience to the world, domestic responsibility to respond to public anti-nuclear sentiment, responsibility as a non-nuclear weapon state under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to pursue elimination, and responsibility as a state under the nuclear umbrella to encourage the nuclear weapon states' efforts for nuclear disarmament and eventual elimination. Japan's true leadership in this field can be found through addressing all these responsibilities.

International Shared Lessons and Domestic Anti- Nuclear Voices

Japan has a unique and strong voice on nuclear issues because it suffered the consequences of nuclear weapons three times – in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and with the Lucky Dragon incident following a US nuclear weapons test. The well-known and fundamental lessons from these experiences should be shared not only in Japan but also across the world. That is both an international and a domestic responsibility for Japan.

In August of 1945, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed about 210,000 people by the end of the year without discrimination between citizens and soldiers. Survivors, called Hibakusha, have suffered from radiation effects and social discrimination. They and their children constantly worried about the trans-generational genetic effects of radiation. The intellectual development and physical health of some Infant survivors exposed to radiation in utero were severely impacted. The two atomic bombings demonstrated the inhumanity of nuclear weapons and their devastating consequences for human civilization.

The third experience occurred because of the US nuclear test at Bikini atoll in the Marshall Islands in 1954. The Japanese fishing vessel, Lucky Dragon No.5, and its 23 crewmembers were exposed to the radioactive fall-out from the test. The entire crew had radioactive symptoms and the chief radio operator died. The catch of not only the Lucky Dragon but also hundreds of fishing vessels from the region was contaminated by radiation and discarded.¹ The Japanese public faced a fatal threat of radiation, again, from nuclear testing in the distance. These undesired experiences in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and of the Lucky Dragon provided robust and concrete evidence of the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons.

The Lucky Dragon incident triggered public anti-nuclear sentiment in Japan that continues to this day. It started with a grassroots signature campaign against atomic and hydrogen weapons initiated by wives and mothers in Tokyo who worried food contamination from radiation was a real threat to the lives of their families and children. It grew into a national movement that gathered 32 million signatures within 18 months after the incident. The number was about one-third of the total population and half of the working population at the time.² The Japanese government reflects this public sentiment in its nuclear policy. In 1967 it decided to adopt the Three Non-Nuclear Principles prohibiting the possession, production, and introduction of nuclear weapons into Japanese territory. The principles were adopted by the Diet (Japan's legislature) in 1971. Japan also joined the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state in 1976. This strong opposition to nuclear weapons is still shared widely among the Japanese population even today. Participants in opinion polls consistently show 70 to 80% support for the abolition of nuclear weapons.³

Feasible Ways to Lead

Although the Japanese government considers itself as a bridge builder between nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states, the world is skeptical. Japan explicitly opposes signing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which entered into force in January of 2021. The treaty focuses on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and bans member states from possessing, using, threatening to use, testing, producing, stockpiling, and transferring nuclear weapons. Even though the Japanese government supports the goal of a world free from nuclear weapons, it underlines nuclear deterrence is needed for Japan's security in the current security environment in Northeast Asia.

The Japanese government also interfered with a nuclear weapon state attempting to reduce the risk of nuclear weapons, including their accidental and inadvertent use. When the Obama administration considered adopting a nuclear no-first-use (NFU) policy; a policy declaring the United States would not use nuclear weapon first, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, and other Japanese government officials, opposed the policy. Reportedly, these officials were concerned a US NFU policy would weaken the US nuclear umbrella and deterrence against North Korea and China.

To perform a substantive leadership role in nuclear disarmament and the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons, Japan needs to leverage its dualistic position as a victim of nuclear weapons and a state under the US nuclear extended deterrence. The TPNW and the NFU policy are two tools that would not only enhance efforts towards the goal of elimination, but also reduce the risk of current nuclear weapons policies at a time of heightened regional tensions. Both provide a means for nuclear weapons states to implement disarmament efforts that are beneficial for Japan's security.

The TPNW is built on the lessons learned from Japan's experience of the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. It makes sense that 75% of the Japanese public support the TPNW and are asking the Japanese government to sign and ratify it.⁴ The TPNW is a legitimate vehicle for Japan to exercise its leadership. Japan's participation in shaping the discussion on the implementation of the treaty would be a meaningful way for it to make a tangible contribution towards a nuclear weapon free world. Despite the lessons from the history and the public support, the Japanese government refuses to sign and ratify the TPNW because it believes US nuclear deterrence is crucial for Japan's security under a deteriorating security environment. But there is an intermediate way to take part in the discussions on the treaty as an observer. Under the circumstance of increasing regional tension, some level of Japanese participation in the TPNW would send a positive signal of concern about nuclear risk.

An NFU policy would improve prospects for progress in nuclear disarmament and increase Japan's security. A US declaration it would never use nuclear weapons first would reduce the risk of misperceptions and miscalculations that can lead to accidental or inadvertent use of nuclear weapons. Moreover, a no first use policy would not weaken the nuclear umbrella, since it is based on the promise of US retaliation from a nuclear attack, not on the threat of first use. Japan has tried to boost its ballistic missile defense (BMD) capability with the hope it might protect Japan from China and North Korea. Under the nuclear umbrella, Japanese BMD capability provides additional defense for US forces in Japan. However, missile defense has the contradictory capacity to erode an adversary's sense of security by weakening the deterrent effect of its nuclear forces. As the confrontation between the United States and China continues to get worse, a US NFU declaration would reduce misperceptions and the pressure on China to increase the size of its nuclear arsenal or move to a launch on warning policy.

The world is facing the twin challenge of a breakdown of nuclear disarmament talks between nuclear weapons states and a stalemate in the dialogue between nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states. Even in today's deteriorating security environment, Japan, because of its dualistic position, is uniquely qualified to fill the gap between nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states and help them both take tangible steps toward a nuclear weapon free world.

*This article is the personal opinion of the author and does not represent the view of the organization.

¹ Glenn D. Hook, "Evolution of the anti-nuclear discourse in Japan," *Current Research on Peace and Violence* 10, no. 1 (1987): 32-43. Yaizu City, Daigo Fukuryu Maru Kona 第五福竜丸コーナー [Lucky Dragon No.5 Section] (accessed July 25, 2021); accessed from <https://www.city.yaizu.lg.jp/rekimin/kannai/index05.html> ;Daigo Fukuryu Maru Exhibition Hall, Daigo Fukuryu Maru Toha 第五福竜丸とは [About Lucky Dragon No.5] (accessed July 25, 2021); accessed from <http://d5f.org/about>.

² Hook, *Ibid.* Eriko Maruhama, "The Bravo Test and the Citizen Petitions for the Nuclear Test Ban: Reflections after 60 Years (Special Feature: Reconsidering the Castle Bravo Incident)," *Hiroshima Peace Research Journal*, no. 2 (2015): 47-75. Accessed July 25, 2021. Available from <http://harp.lib.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/hiroshima-cu/metadata/12248>.

³ NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, “Genbaku Toka Kara 70 Nen Usureru Kioku, Dou Katari Tsugu 原爆投下から70年 薄れる記憶、どう語り継ぐ,” [70 Years after the Atomic Bombings How Can We Prevent Their Memory From Fading and Convey It to Next Generations], The NHK Monthly Report on Broadcast Research 65, no.11(2015): 2-15. Accessed July 25, 2021. Available from [20151101_5.pdf\(nhk.or.jp\)](https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/45th_president/articles/2018-0104-00.html) . NHK, Nichibei Yoron Chosa 日米世論調査, [Japan-US Opinion Poll] (accessed July 25, 2021); accessed from https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/45th_president/articles/2018-0104-00.html. And, NHK, Amerika Jin Yaku 7 Wari “Kaku Heiki Wa Hitsuyo Nai” アメリカ人約7割「核兵器は必要ない」 [70% of US Participants Say “Nuclear Weapon is needed”] (accessed July 25, 2021); accessed from <https://www.nhk.or.jp/politics/articles/statement/42800.html>.

⁴ Jonathon Baron, Rebecca Davis Gibbons, and Stephen Herzog, “Japanese Public Opinion, Political Persuasion, and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 3:2 (2020): 299-309. DOI: 10.1080/25751654.2020.1834961.

Miyako Kurosaki

Research coordinator at the Hiroshima Organization for Global Peace (HOPe). She holds a Master's degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in the United States. She was a reporter for Kyodo News and a research consultant for the Union of Concerned Scientists before assuming her current position.