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Japan and Nuclear Weapons Between Extended Deterrence and Normative Dilemmas



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Abstract

Since the late 1950s, Japan's nuclear weapons policy has been based on the coexistence of two competing normative rationales: the rejection of nuclear weapons, rooted in the legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the recognition of the central role of US extended nuclear deterrence for Japan's security.

The deterioration of the security environment in Northeast Asia is undermining the balance between these two approaches. Faced with the unprecedented expansion of China's nuclear arsenal, North Korea's consolidation as a regional nuclear power, and the resurgence of the Russian threat, Japan is confronting growing risks that are testing the credibility of extended deterrence—concerns that have intensified since Donald Trump's return to power.

In this context, despite persistent calls for domestic nuclear proliferation, the rejection of a military nuclear program stems from a deliberate choice, reaffirmed since the 1960s, based on constraints that remain valid to this day. At the same time, the public debate on nuclear issues is broadening to focus on three questions that heighten the tension between the two normative approaches: the revision of the principle of not introducing nuclear weapons onto national territory; nuclear sharing with the US, which is officially rejected but is attracting growing interest; and naval nuclear propulsion, whose strategic value faces legal and political obstacles.

These debates indicate that the future of Japan's nuclear weapons policy is increasingly shaped by the regional strategic environment and is now playing out in the tension between the strict commitment to the three non-nuclear principles and the reality of deterrence imperatives.

Résumé

Depuis la fin des années 1950, la politique japonaise en matière d'armes nucléaires repose sur la coexistence de deux logiques normatives concurrentes : le rejet de l'arme nucléaire, ancré dans l'héritage de Hiroshima et de Nagasaki, et la reconnaissance du rôle central de la dissuasion nucléaire élargie américaine pour la sécurité du Japon.

La dégradation de l'environnement sécuritaire en Asie du Nord-Est fragilise l'équilibre entre ces deux logiques. Confronté à l'expansion sans précédent de l'arsenal nucléaire chinois, à la consolidation de la Corée du Nord en tant que puissance nucléaire régionale et à la résurgence de la menace russe, le Japon fait face à des risques croissants qui mettent à l'épreuve la crédibilité de la dissuasion élargie – interrogations accentuées depuis le retour de Donald Trump au pouvoir.

Dans ce contexte, malgré la persistance de déclarations en faveur d'une prolifération nucléaire nationale, le rejet d'un programme nucléaire militaire procède d'un choix réfléchi et renouvelé depuis les années 1960, fondé sur des contraintes qui demeurent toutes valides. En parallèle, le débat public sur les questions nucléaires s'élargit autour de trois questions qui accroissent la tension entre les deux logiques normatives : la révision du principe de non-introduction des armes nucléaires sur le territoire national ; un partage nucléaire avec les États-Unis, officiellement rejeté mais bénéficiant d'un intérêt croissant ; et la propulsion nucléaire navale, dont la valeur stratégique se heurte à des obstacles juridiques et politiques.

Ces débats indiquent que l'avenir de la politique japonaise en matière d'armes nucléaires est de plus en plus déterminé par l'environnement stratégique régional, et se joue désormais dans l'espace entre la lettre des principes non nucléaires et la réalité des impératifs de dissuasion.

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Introduction

Since the late 1950s, Japan's relationship with nuclear weapons has been characterized by the coexistence of two competing normative imperatives. The first views nuclear weapons as a threat to Japan and is rooted in the legacy of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (August 6 and 9, 1945), which caused at least 200,000 deaths, making Japan the only country to have suffered the use of nuclear weapons in wartime. This normative framework, championed by major civil society organizations such as Nihon Hidankyo—an association of atomic bomb survivors (*hibakusha*) and recipient of the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize—, constitutes the moral and historical foundation of Japan's initiatives in favor of nuclear disarmament.

The second normative framework, by contrast, holds that, in the absence of the complete abolition of nuclear weapons, they remain an indispensable instrument for national security, within the framework of the bilateral alliance with the United States established in 1952 and consolidated by the 1960 Security Treaty. Although not explicitly mentioned in these treaties, US extended nuclear deterrence—that is, the United States' commitment to defend Japan using all of its capabilities, including nuclear—constitutes one of their pillars. This commitment has strengthened over the decades, notably through the deployment of nuclear weapons on Japanese territories under US administration until the early 1970s, as well as through the gradual development of a dedicated institutional framework. Since the mid-1960s, adherence to US extended nuclear deterrence has been at the heart of Japan's defense strategy.

Japan's nuclear weapons policy is therefore based on the constant search for a balance between these two competing normative logics. This balance is now being undermined by the ongoing deterioration of the security environment in Northeast Asia and beyond. North Korea is consolidating its status as a *de facto* nuclear power; the opaque and unprecedented expansion of China's nuclear arsenal is perceived as a major threat; Moscow's coercive nuclear rhetoric since the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, combined with the collapse of the Russian-American arms control regime—illustrated by the termination of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019 and the expiration of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in February 2026, removing the last constraints on the two powers' strategic arsenals—, has reignited concerns about Russia. Finally, the policies pursued by Donald Trump since his return to power in January 2025 are exacerbating doubts about the credibility of US guarantees.

Against this backdrop—marked by the unprecedented centrality of nuclear weapons in strategic rivalries in Northeast Asia—several debates that were once marginal in Japan have recently gained prominence: the revision of the principle prohibiting the introduction of nuclear weapons onto Japanese territory, the issue of nuclear sharing with the United States, and the development of nuclear-powered submarines. At the same time, positions in favor of developing nuclear weapons—which, though held by a minority, have been recurring since the 1950s in certain conservative and strategic circles—continue to emerge in public debate.

This paper places these developments within their historical trajectory and regional strategic context to demonstrate that they reflect not so much a temptation to acquire nuclear weapons as an effort to strengthen the alliance and extended deterrence. It highlights the tensions associated with this evolution, revealing the growing contradictions between security imperatives and the persistence of a national identity marked by the tragedy of the atomic bombings.

The foundations of Japan's nuclear weapons policy

Three principles, four pillars

Japan's nuclear weapons policy is based on the management of two competing imperatives that gradually became institutionalized during the 1950s and 1960s.

The first normative argument, advocating for the abolition of nuclear weapons, traces its origins to the contamination of the tuna fishing vessel *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* by radioactive fallout from the US thermonuclear test "Castle Bravo" in March 1954. Accused of turning the Japanese into "human guinea pigs of radiological warfare,"¹ the test reignited the trauma and memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, fueling public rejection of the alliance with the United States and leading to the expansion of the Japanese anti-nuclear movement. The movement immediately took on national proportions, as evidenced by the approximately 32 million signatures—out of a population of about 88 million—collected by a petition calling for a ban on nuclear weapons in early 1955.²

Despite growing political divisions, this mobilization remained strong throughout the 1960s and was directed, in particular, against port calls by US ships and submarines suspected of carrying nuclear weapons.³ This pressure played a major role in Prime Minister Eisaku Sato's formulation, in December 1967, of the "Three Non-Nuclear Principles," which prohibit the possession, production, and introduction of nuclear weapons onto Japanese territory.⁴

A second normative framework emerged in parallel, based on deterrence and recognizing the central role of nuclear weapons in Japan's security policy. Beginning in the mid-1950s, US nuclear weapons were deployed to several Japanese territories that remained under US administration after 1945: in the Okinawa archipelago from 1954 to 1972 (when it was returned to Japan) and on the islands of Chichi-jima and Iwo-

1. M. Takeya, "Shi no Hai no naka ni Tachiagaru Mono" [That Which Rises from the Ashes of Death], *Kaizo*, May 1954.

2. G. D. Hook, "Evolution of the Anti-Nuclear Discourse in Japan," *Current Research on Peace and Violence*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1987, pp. 32–43.

3. T. Higuchi, "Just Another Ship? US Nuclear-Powered Warships and Secrecy in Japan, 1959–1972," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 49, No. 4, August 2025, pp. 524–550.

4. W. Mukai, "The Unnecessary Option to Go Nuclear: Japan's Non-Nuclear Policy in an Era of Uncertainty, 1950s–1960s," in: M. D. Gordin and G. J. Ikenberry (eds.), *The Age of Hiroshima*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020, pp. 144–163.

jima before their return in 1968.⁵ The special status of these territories, over which Japanese sovereignty had not been restored, allowed the Japanese government to avoid coming into direct conflict with the demands of anti-nuclear movements—which opposed the introduction of nuclear weapons on Japanese soil—while remaining part of the US deterrence framework.

China's first nuclear test in October 1964 reinforced this commitment to deterrence. In January 1965, Sato secured a reaffirmation of US nuclear guarantees from President Lyndon B. Johnson, though no official announcement was made: the prime minister had stated that it was impossible for him to report this publicly, given a domestic political climate still largely marked by hostility toward nuclear weapons.⁶ The prospect of acceding to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), signed in 1970 and ratified in 1976, further reinforced the importance placed on extended deterrence. The compatibility between the treaty and this policy, as well as the consideration of the security interests of non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS), were essential conditions for Tokyo's accession.⁷

In January 1968, Sato made the “three principles” the fourth pillar of Japanese nuclear policy, alongside the promotion of nuclear disarmament, US extended nuclear deterrence, and the development of peaceful uses of nuclear energy.⁸ In particular, Sato sought to relativize the scope of the three principles so that the logic of disarmament they embodied would not overshadow the now-central role of extended deterrence.⁹ The consistent refusal of successive Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) governments to enshrine the three principles in law stems from the same logic. Adopted by the Diet in 1971 as “national policy” (*kokuze*)—that is, as a guideline for government action—they have strong normative weight but remain non-legally binding.

The four pillars thus reflect the institutionalization of the two competing approaches that continue to shape and create tension within Japan's nuclear weapons policy. This duality is not limited to the political sphere but permeates Japanese society as a whole; in 2023, 66.8% of Japanese people supported efforts toward nuclear disarmament, while 85% wanted to

5. R. S. Norris, W. M. Arkin, and W. Burr, “Where They Were: How Much Did Japan Know?”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 56, No. 1, January 2000, available at: www.thebulletin.org.

6. “Memorandum of Conversation, January 12, 1965,” in: *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. XXIX, part 2, “Japan,” document 41, Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2006, p. 70.

7. E. Cho, “Impact of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime on Japan's Non-Nuclear Policy, 1965–1976,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2021, pp. 114–130.

8. E. Sato, “Hikaku San Gensoku ni Kansuru Sato Shusho no Kokkai Toben” [Prime Minister Sato's Response to the Diet Regarding the Three Non-Nuclear Principles], 58th Ordinary Session of the Diet, Tokyo, January 30, 1968, available at: www.worldjpn.net.

9. A. Kurosaki, “Japan's Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Diplomacy During the Cold War: The Myth and Reality of a Nuclear-Bombed Country,” in: J. Baylis and Y. Iwama (eds.), *Joining the Non-Proliferation Treaty: Deterrence, Non-Proliferation, and the American Alliance*, New York: Routledge, 2019, pp. 131–150.

maintain extended nuclear deterrence.¹⁰ The coexistence of these two approaches is therefore structural, forcing successive Japanese governments to maintain a precarious balance between these two imperatives.

Opposition to proliferation and the issue of nuclear latency

The question of potential Japanese nuclear proliferation regularly undermines this balance. Japan is often portrayed as a “threshold state,” capable of developing nuclear weapons in a relatively short time due to its technological advantage. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Japan developed a civilian nuclear program to reduce its dependence on fossil-fuel imports in the wake of the oil crises. Tokyo has thus developed a plutonium-based nuclear fuel cycle on a scale unmatched among the NPT non-nuclear-weapon states. The goal is a “closed” cycle, in which fuel from reactors is reprocessed to extract plutonium, which can then be reused as MOX fuel in fast-neutron reactors.

The central role of plutonium—a dual-use fissile material that can be used for military purposes—in Japan’s civilian program has raised concerns since the 1990s about potential nuclear proliferation.¹¹ Some analysts view this as the cornerstone of a “nuclear latency” strategy, aimed at developing and maintaining the capabilities necessary for weapons development should a political decision to that effect be made.¹²

Questions on this subject were fueled by the revelation, during the 1990s, of studies conducted by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense, the most notable of which date from 1968, 1970, and 1995,¹³ as well as by statements from certain prominent conservative leaders—including prime ministers, from Nobusuke Kishi to Shinzo Abe—asserting that Japan possesses such capabilities.¹⁴ The significance of these statements, which can be interpreted as signals directed at both Japan’s adversaries and its American ally, with the aim of securing stronger security guarantees,¹⁵ should not, however, be overestimated.

Indeed, it remains impossible to prove the existence of a coordinated strategy of latency at the highest levels. It is, however, easy to highlight the

10. N. Akiyama, Y. Ohara, and Y. Matsushita, “Ambivalent Japan: Japanese Public Attitudes Toward Nuclear Weapons,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 32, No. 1–2, 2025, pp. 75–106.

11. M. M. Mochizuki, “Japan Tests the Nuclear Taboo,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2007, pp. 303–328.

12. R. J. Samuels and J. Schoff, “Japan’s Nuclear Hedge: Beyond ‘Allergy’ and Breakout,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 130, No. 3, Fall 2015, pp. 475–503.

13. M. Fitzpatrick, *Asia’s Latent Nuclear Powers: Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan*, London: Routledge, 2016.

14. S. Romei, “The Legacy of Shinzo Abe: A Japan Divided About Nuclear Weapons,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 24, 2022, available at: www.thebulletin.org.

15. T. Albessard, “Japan’s Nuclear Latency: A Double-Edged Diplomatic Tool?,” *Study*, No. 93, Strategic Research Institute of the École Militaire (IRSEM), May 2022, available at: www.irsem.fr.

consistency of Japan's choice, insofar as none of the studies mentioned above concluded in favor of a national nuclear program, with each assessment finding that the costs and constraints would outweigh the potential benefits.

The obstacles remain substantial:

- On the technical front, the incomplete mastery of technologies essential to the manufacture of nuclear weapons (detonation, metallurgy, miniaturization, etc) and the absence of a fully operational closed cycle;¹⁶
- legally, the prohibition on the development of nuclear weapons under the 1955 Atomic Energy Basic Act, which limits the use of nuclear energy to peaceful purposes, as well as Japan's commitments under the NPT;
- politically, opposition from the Japanese public, the reluctance of some of the actors tasked with implementing such a program,¹⁷ the potentially harmful consequences for the alliance with the United States, the very integrity of the nonproliferation regime, and Japan's international standing, which would be exposed to the risk of sanctions and diplomatic isolation.

Added to this is the need to account for the time required to develop nuclear weapons, which would create a period of heightened vulnerability. It is inconceivable that Tokyo could pursue such a program without Beijing, Pyongyang, or Moscow becoming aware of it or retaliating. The decision to acquire nuclear weapons would therefore result in greater insecurity for Japan, contrary to the expectations associated with that choice. The rejection of a nuclear program therefore stems more from a deliberate and consistently reaffirmed choice than from a "nuclear aversion" supposedly holding back policymakers.¹⁸ This position therefore appears particularly robust and constitutes one of the cornerstones of Japan's nuclear policy. Several factors could, however, cause this position to shift in the medium term.

The first is the ongoing deterioration of the regional security environment, which continues to prompt—albeit to a limited extent—statements in favor of nuclear weapons, as illustrated by the "leaks" to the press from an advisor to Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi in December 2025.¹⁹ The second is the evolution of the US strategic debate and the role played in it by the issue of "allied" or "friendly" proliferation, according to which the development of nuclear weapons by certain US allies would serve American

16. T. Suzuki, "Rokkasho Redux: Japan's Never-Ending Reprocessing Saga," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 26, 2023, available at: www.thebulletin.org.

17. J. E. C. Hymans, "Veto Players, Nuclear Energy, and Nonproliferation: Domestic Institutional Barriers to a Japanese Bomb," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2011, pp. 154–189.

18. N. Akiyama, "Disarmament and the Non-Proliferation Policy of Japan," in: M. McCarthy (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Foreign Policy*, London: Routledge, 2018, pp. 173–187.

19. "Senior Official: Japan Should Possess Nuclear Weapons," *The Asahi Shimbun*, December 19, 2025, available at: www.asahi.com.

interests, whether based on a logic of burden-sharing,²⁰ the avoidance of risks deemed disproportionate for Washington,²¹ or even a strategy of last resort in the face of a US inability to deter regional adversaries, notably Beijing.²² This approach is not the prevailing view and would entail significant costs and limitations, but it continues to attract support in certain US strategic and academic circles. The third factor is the South Korean debate on nuclear proliferation, which is closely watched in Tokyo; a recent study showed that Seoul's acquisition of nuclear weapons would significantly increase support for such an option among Japanese elites.²³

While the South Korean factor remains a consideration in Japan, its significance should not be overstated. It is, in fact, unlikely that a partner democracy's acquisition of nuclear weapons would be the primary trigger for a Japanese nuclear program, given that the expansion of the Soviet arsenal and the acquisition of nuclear weapons by China and then North Korea did not elicit a similar reaction. Moreover, although frequently compared, the Japanese and South Korean nuclear debates exhibit profound differences that qualify the theory of a "cascade" effect of proliferation. In South Korea, the immediate and existential threat posed by North Korea—located less than 100 kilometers from Seoul—and the absence of an equivalent to the normative legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki may have led a significant portion of public opinion and the political elite to be open to the development of a national nuclear capability.²⁴ In Japan, which is more focused on the Chinese threat—a threat that is certainly significant but less immediate—the constraints of the normative logic of disarmament keep open advocacy of pro-nuclear positions on the fringes of public debate—even if those fringes appear to be gradually widening.

20. S. Condon, "Donald Trump: Japan, South Korea Might Need Nuclear Weapons," CBS News, March 29, 2016, available at: www.cbsnews.com.

21. D. Bandow, "Why Shouldn't America's Allies Build Nukes?", Cato Institute, August 22, 2018, available at: www.cato.org.

22. O. Zajec, "The Illusion of 'Friendly' Nuclear Proliferation in Europe," *Policy Paper*, "Strategic Thought" series, No. 1, Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies (IESD), February 2026, available at: www.iesd.univ-lyon3.fr.

23. V. Cha and K. Govella, "Why Japan and South Korea Won't Go Nuclear," *Foreign Affairs*, May 7, 2026, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

24. L. Kim, "Will South Korea's Nuclear Ambitions Subside in the Next Five Years?", Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 7, 2025, available at: www.csis.org.

Japan faces nuclear threats in northeast Asia

China, North Korea, Russia: Japan facing the “three nuclear fronts”

While the possibility of domestic proliferation remains unlikely, Japan’s nuclear weapons policy is nonetheless set to evolve due to the ongoing deterioration of the regional security environment. Tokyo lies at the intersection of two major dynamics reshaping the balance of power in Northeast Asia: the expansion of China’s nuclear arsenal and North Korea’s rise as a regional nuclear power. Added to this is the persistent Russian threat. Together, these threats place Japan at the center of what political scientist Hiroyasu Akutsu calls the “three nuclear fronts.”²⁵

Described in the December 2022 *National Security Strategy* as presenting “an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge,”²⁶ China has emerged as the primary threat to Japan. The development of a comprehensive nuclear triad and the proliferation of delivery systems capable of reaching US territory are fueling fears related to the stability-instability paradox: The strengthening of China’s arsenal could deter Washington from intervening in a regional conflict, encouraging Beijing to adopt a more offensive posture.²⁷

The development of intermediate-range missiles with both conventional and nuclear capabilities is also viewed by Tokyo as part of an anti-access, area-denial strategy designed to hinder US intervention.²⁸ Indeed, these missiles could enable China to strike US forces as far away as Guam—in the case of the DF-26—while also offering options for the limited use of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, their dual-use nature introduces an ambiguity that could complicate escalation management in the event of a conflict, since it is impossible to determine with certainty whether the missiles are carrying a nuclear or conventional warhead.

25. H. Akutsu, “Considering the Possibility of a Nuclear Attack on Japan: From the Perspective of Simulations in the Era of the ‘Three Nuclear Fronts’” [Considering the Possibility of a Nuclear Attack on Japan from the Perspective of Simulations in the Era of the ‘Three Nuclear Fronts’], *Anzenhosho Kenkyu* [Security Studies], Vol. 5, No. 2, 2023, pp. 1–18.

26. “National Security Strategy of Japan”, Cabinet of the Prime Minister of Japan, December 2022, p. 9, available at: www.cas.go.jp.

27. K. Kakihara, “Redesigning US-Japan Security in a ‘Two-Peer’ Nuclear Era,” Institute of Geoeconomics, April 2, 2026, available at: www.instituteofgeoeconomics.org.

28. “Defense of Japan 2025”, Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2025, p. 61, available at: www.mod.go.jp.

Furthermore, suspicions about the development of “tactical” nuclear weapons, combined with growing doubts about China’s adherence to a doctrine of minimal deterrence and no first use, reinforce fears that the threshold for nuclear use is being lowered and that nuclear blackmail could occur in the event of a conflict over the Taiwan Strait.²⁹

North Korea also poses a major threat. Since 2006, Pyongyang has conducted six nuclear tests and developed an arsenal ranging from short-range missiles capable of striking the archipelago to intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of reaching US territory. The recent development of nuclear-capable cruise missiles and new ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) capabilities is seen as a sign of a qualitative improvement in North Korea’s program,³⁰ while the adoption in 2022 of a doctrine allowing for the preemptive use of nuclear weapons has been interpreted as a lowering of the threshold for their use.³¹ The new alliance between North Korea and Russia, the rapid strengthening of their military cooperation, and Pyongyang’s support for Russian forces during the invasion of Ukraine also fuel fears that North Korea may, in return, benefit from Russian technology transfers to advance its military and nuclear programs.³²

Finally, Russia has been reassessed as a threat since February 2022 due to its invasion of Ukraine, its aggressive nuclear rhetoric, the strengthening of military cooperation with Pyongyang, and the intensification of Sino-Russian military exercises near the archipelago. The expiration of the New START treaty in February 2026 is also fueling Japanese concerns about the removal of any constraints on the deployment of Russian strategic delivery systems and the potential repercussions on the alliance with the United States.³³

Strengthening Japan’s defense and deterrence policy

In the face of these threats, Japan has chosen to strengthen both the extended nuclear deterrence provided by its alliance with the United States and its own conventional deterrence capabilities. Since the 1960s, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces have been tasked with deterring and repelling any conventional aggression, in coordination with US extended nuclear deterrence, which remains the ultimate safeguard against strategic threats. Japan’s concept of deterrence explicitly integrates national conventional

29. H. Ogi, “How Should Japan Respond to China’s Nuclear Threat?”, Institute of Geoeconomics, April 9, 2026, available at: www.instituteofgeoeconomics.org.

30. “Defense of Japan 2025”, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

31. T. Watanabe, “North Korea’s Doctrine of Nuclear Preemption – War Starting with Nuclear Weapons Rather than Escalation to a Nuclear War,” *NIDS Commentary*, No. 345, National Institute for Defense Studies, August 6, 2024, available at: www.nids.mod.go.jp.

32. “Defense of Japan 2025”, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

33. N. Akiyama, “The Future of the Nuclear Order,” in: “Strategic Outlook 2026 – The Crumbling International Order: A Strategic Perspective in an Age of Uncertainty”, The Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 3, 2026, pp. 26–28, available at: www.jiia.or.jp.

capabilities and US extended nuclear deterrence, given their complementary nature across different threat levels.³⁴

Established in 2010, the Extended Deterrence Dialogue (EDD) is the first bilateral framework dedicated to discussions regarding US nuclear guarantees. Its creation followed in the wake of the *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) and President Barack Obama's April 2009 speech in Prague, which emphasized the need to promote nuclear disarmament and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategies. The concerns raised by this speech among Washington's allies led to a reaffirmation of US assurances regarding extended nuclear deterrence and strengthened cooperation in this area.

The EDD was therefore intended to reassure Japan and institutionalize the dialogue between the two allies.³⁵ Elevated to the ministerial level in July 2024 and now including tabletop exercises, it was consolidated by the adoption, in December 2024, of "Guidelines for Extended Deterrence," the contents of which have not been made public.³⁶ This institutionalization process is also taking place in a trilateral format involving South Korea, as evidenced by the Camp David Declaration of August 2023,³⁷ and the reaffirmation of US nuclear guarantees in this context in September 2025.³⁸

Finally, the 2018 and 2022 NPRs were welcomed in Tokyo as signs of continued US commitment; the first accompanied the plan to deploy nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM-Ns),³⁹ while the second (contrary to statements made by then-candidate Joe Biden) did not include either a no-first-use doctrine or the "sole purpose" principle, indicating the maintenance of a robust nuclear posture.⁴⁰

Questions about the strength of US guarantees have nevertheless intensified since Donald Trump returned to power in January 2025. The emphasis on the Western Hemisphere, the absence of any reference to North Korea's denuclearization in the November 2025 *National Security Strategy*, and references to a possible US-China G2 are all factors causing concern regarding Washington's reliability.⁴¹

34 "Diplomatic Bluebook 2024", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024, p. 197, available at: www.mofa.go.jp.

35. B. Roberts, *The Case for US Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016, p. 202.

36. "Government of the United States of America – Government of Japan Guidelines for Extended Deterrence," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 27, 2024, available at: www.mofa.go.jp.

37. "The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States," White House, August 18, 2023, available at: www.bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov.

38. "Joint Statement from the Trilateral Meeting of the United States of America, Japan, and the Republic of Korea in New York City," US Department of State, September 22, 2025, available at: www.state.gov.

39. "The Release of the US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) (Statement by Foreign Minister Taro Kono)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, February 3, 2018, available at: www.mofa.go.jp.

40. "Press Conference by Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 28, 2022, available at: www.mofa.go.jp.

41. T. Kotani, "US Strategic Restraint and Japan's Security," in: "Strategic Outlook 2026 – The Crumbling International Order: A Strategic Perspective in an Age of Uncertainty", The Japan Institute of International Affairs, April 7, 2026, pp. 5–7, available at: www.jiia.or.jp.

Beyond the short-term uncertainties linked to the Trump administration, the structural nature of doubts about the credibility of extended deterrence explains the strengthening of Japan's conventional capabilities. These capabilities are part of a logic of complementarity explicitly articulated in Japanese strategic documents; the Japan Self-Defense Force conventional forces aim to strengthen the credibility of the alliance's overall deterrence by raising the cost of conventional aggression and sub-nuclear coercion attempts, while extended nuclear deterrence covers high-end threats, including nuclear ones.⁴²

Japan's strategy is based on two distinct approaches. The traditional doctrine of deterrence by denial aims to prevent an adversary from achieving its military objectives. Since the early 2000s, it has relied on missile defense systems developed jointly with the United States (*Aegis*, *Patriot*). The second approach, introduced in December 2022, is deterrence by retaliation based on "counterstrike" capabilities (*hangeki noryoku*). In the event of an attack on Japan, the objective is to "mount effective counterstrikes against the opponent's territory" in order to "prevent further attacks."⁴³ Any preemptive use of force—defined as "striking first at a stage when no armed attack has occurred"—remains prohibited.⁴⁴

The capabilities selected to implement this approach are upgraded versions of the Type 12 anti-ship missiles, whose range is expected to exceed 1,000 kilometers, and *Tomahawk* cruise missiles. Notable milestones were reached in March 2026 with the deployment of the first upgraded Type 12 missiles to Kumamoto⁴⁵ and the modification of a Kongo-class destroyer to make it capable of launching *Tomahawks*.⁴⁶

However, as in Europe, the focus on the material dimension—driven by a desire to catch up in terms of capabilities—precedes the development of an operational doctrine. Many questions therefore remain unanswered: Would the Diet authorize strikes on Chinese territory? At what level of escalation would these capabilities be employed, and how would they be coordinated with US forces? At this stage, the lack of answers limits both the operational credibility of these capabilities and their deterrent effect.⁴⁷

42. "Defense of Japan 2025", Ministry of Defense of Japan, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

43. "National Security Strategy of Japan", *op. cit.*, p. 19.

44. *Ibid.*

45. J. Johnson, "Japan's 'Counterstrike Capability' Takes Shape with Missile Deployments," *The Japan Times*, March 31, 2026, available at: www.japantimes.co.jp.

46. J. Johnson, "MSDF Destroyer Becomes Japan's First Ship Capable of Firing Tomahawk Missiles," *The Japan Times*, March 27, 2026, available at: www.japantimes.co.jp.

47. R. Inoue, "Will Japan Have the Political Resolve to Use Counterstrike?", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2024, pp. 45–61.

The evolution of Japanese nuclear policy: three emerging debates

The deterioration of the regional strategic environment and growing uncertainties about the credibility of US protection have brought unprecedented attention to debates on Japan's nuclear policy, raising new political questions while bringing discussions—previously limited to small circles of experts—into the public sphere. These debates now center on three issues: the revision of the principle prohibiting the introduction of nuclear weapons onto Japanese territory, the possibility of nuclear sharing with the United States, and the development of nuclear-powered submarines. While distinct in their specific concerns, these debates are all subject to the same tension between the normative logic of disarmament and the growing imperatives of deterrence.

Toward an evolution of the non-introduction principle?

In November 2025, Prime Minister Takaichi stated that she could not confirm that the three non-nuclear principles would remain unchanged as part of the review of the *National Security Strategy*, sparking outrage among *hibakusha* organizations.⁴⁸ The non-introduction principle is the most likely to evolve in the medium term. As early as 2024, Takaichi had argued that it was not “realistic” in light of the requirements related to extended deterrence.⁴⁹

Some voices within the LDP have long advocated for its revision in order to strengthen cooperation with the United States within the framework of extended deterrence. An internal LDP report in 2011 thus recommended a shift to “2.5 non-nuclear principles,” maintaining the refusal to deploy nuclear weapons on national territory while accepting port calls by US nuclear-armed submarines (SSBNs) at Japanese ports.⁵⁰ The highly publicized port call by such a submarine in South Korea in July 2023 was

48. “Takaichi Declines to Confirm Stance on ‘3 Non-Nuclear Principles’,” *The Asahi Shimbun*, November 12, 2025, available at: www.asahi.com.

49. S. Takaichi, *Kokuryoku Kenkyu. Nippon Retto wo, Tsuyoku Yutaka ni*, [Study of National Power: Strengthening and Enriching the Japanese Archipelago], Tokyo: Sankei Shimbun Publications, 2024, p. 18.

50. “National Strategy Headquarters – 5th Policy Committee (Foreign Affairs – Security Division)”, Liberal Democratic Party National Strategy Headquarters, July 19, 2011, p. 5, available at: www.jimin.jp.

cited by some elected officials as a model from which Japan could draw inspiration.⁵¹

This issue has also gained significance with the prospect of deploying the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) aboard US nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) by 2034. Some researchers believe that a revision of the principle would be necessary to allow these SSNs to make port calls in Japan without interfering with their deterrence mission.⁵² A similar issue arises in the air domain. Some former senior officials of the Self-Defense Forces have recommended revising the principle to authorize the passage through Japanese airspace of US aircraft carrying nuclear weapons, as well as their stationing on Japanese territory.⁵³

A formal revision of the principle, however, would not be essential. In 2010, Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada stated that, in the event of an emergency where Japan's security could not be ensured without the stopover of US SSBNs, "the government of the time would make a decision with its fate at stake and provide an explanation to the public."⁵⁴ This statement is all the more significant given that it came from a government formed by the Democratic opposition, which has historically been more reserved regarding the alliance with the United States. This approach was reaffirmed by the Takaichi cabinet.⁵⁵

Thus, the issue of revising the non-introduction principle is taking on increasing prominence in Japanese public debate. While in 2023, 46% of the population supported maintaining the three principles, 39% favored revising the non-introduction principle.⁵⁶

The debate on nuclear sharing

Closely linked to the issue of the non-introduction principle, the debate over nuclear sharing represents a further step in Japan's strategic thinking: no longer the deployment of nuclear weapons in times of crisis, but their permanent stationing on national territory, coupled with Japan's inclusion in the decision-making process regarding their use. Some advocates of this option even believe that Japan's F-35A fighter jets should be modified to carry nuclear weapons and

51. T. Kelly, J. Geddie, J-m. Park *et al.*, "Trump Shock Spurs Japan to Think About the Unthinkable: Nuclear Arms," Reuters, August 19, 2025, available at: www.reuters.com.

52. M. Murano, "Sogo Anzenhosho Purojekuto – Chugoku no Kaku Senryaku-Kaku Senryoku no Henka" [Comprehensive Security Project – Changes in China's Nuclear Strategy and Nuclear Forces], Japan Institute for National Fundamentals, September 24, 2024, available at: www.jinf.jp.

53. "Toward Improving the Effectiveness of Extended Deterrence in the Japan-US Alliance: Making the 'Nuclear Umbrella' a Reality," Sasakawa Peace Foundation, June 2025, p. 6, available at: www.spf.org.

54. "Review of Japan's Non-Nuclear Principles Simmers Beneath Economy-Focused Election," *The Mainichi Shinbun*, February 11, 2026, available at: www.mainichi.jp.

55. *Ibid.*

56. "Taiwan Yuji Toben 'Tekisetsu' 55% - Hikaku Sangensoku, Kenji 46%, Minaoshi 39%" [55% Deem Taiwan's Emergency Response "Appropriate" – Three Non-Nuclear Principles: 46% in Favor of Maintaining Them, 39% in Favor of Revising Them], *Nikkei*, December 1, 2025, available at: www.nikkei.com.

that nuclear weapons storage facilities should be established on Japanese territory, based on a system directly modeled after NATO's.⁵⁷

This recent debate was launched in March 2022 by former Prime Minister Abe, who had argued, shortly after the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, that the subject could no longer remain taboo.⁵⁸ It gained renewed attention shortly before the election of Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba in September 2024, following his proposals for an "Asian NATO" that included the possibility of nuclear sharing.⁵⁹ This option has, however, been rejected on several occasions: by Fumio Kishida's cabinet and the LDP following Abe's remark,⁶⁰ and more recently by Prime Minister Takaichi.⁶¹

The issue has not, however, disappeared from public debate: in 2023, 47% of the population supported a public debate on nuclear sharing (understood as the storage of US nuclear weapons on Japanese territory and Japan's inclusion in the decision-making process).⁶² This is a notable figure given the majority opposition to revising the non-introduction principle, which suggests that a significant portion of the public distinguishes between debating this option and actually implementing it. A poll conducted among members of the House of Representatives in February 2026 confirms this shift at the political level: 37% of them believe that this possibility should be explored, a 12-point increase from the previous poll. All elected officials from the Innovation Party, the LDP's coalition partner, support opening such a debate.⁶³

These developments reveal not so much a majority endorsement of the principle of nuclear sharing as a gradual shift in the boundaries of what is acceptable to discuss in Japanese public debate due to the deterioration of the regional strategic context. Significant obstacles remain: the need to revise the non-introduction principle, opposition from a segment of public opinion, and the lack of strategic depth in Japanese territory, which would limit the deterrent value of deploying US nuclear weapons.⁶⁴

57. "Toward Improving the Effectiveness of Extended Deterrence," *op. cit.*, p. 9.

58. H. Odanaka and S. Furukawa, "Nuclear Sharing, a Taboo or Unavoidable Reality? Japan's Political Parties Intensify Debate," *The Mainichi Shimbun*, March 2, 2022, available at: www.mainichi.jp.

59. "Shigeru Ishiba on Japan's New Security Era: The Future of Japan's Foreign Policy," *Commentary*, Hudson Institute, September 25, 2024, available at: www.hudson.org.

60. S. Sakai, M. Nakagawa, and Y. Yamamoto, "Kaku Kyoyu 'Najimanu' – Jimin Chosakai Teigen ni Morikomazu" [Nuclear Sharing "Is Not Appropriate": LDP Study Commission Excludes It from its Proposals], *The Chugoku Shimbun*, March 17, 2022, available at: www.hiroshimapecacemedia.jp.

61. S. Suzuki, "Japan PM Says She Personally Doesn't Approve of 'Nuclear Sharing' With US," *The Mainichi Shimbun*, February 25, 2026, available at: www.mainichi.jp.

62. N. Akiyama, Y. Ohara, and Y. Matsushita, "Ambivalent Japan," *op. cit.*, p. 99.

63. "Ishin Akuseru ? "Kaku Kyoyu" Giron – Takaichi Shusho wa Hitei mo, Kwaru Kokkai Seiryokuzu" [The Innovation Party as an Accelerator? The Debate on Nuclear Power Sharing – Rejection by Prime Minister Takaichi and Mapping of the Shifting Balance of Power in the Diet], *The Mainichi Shimbun*, February 27, 2026, available at: www.mainichi.jp.

64. C. Pajon, "Japan: Decoding Prime Minister Ishiba's Strategic Vision. Toward an Asian Version of NATO?", *Ifri Memos*, Ifri, October 10, 2024, available at: www.ifri.org.

Naval nuclear propulsion

The September 2021 announcement of the AUKUS partnership (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States) and Australia's eventual acquisition of SSNs have helped intensify the debate in Japan over the development of similar capabilities. In September 2025, a report by Japanese experts recommended exploring “next-generation propulsion systems”—a deliberately euphemistic term for naval nuclear propulsion.⁶⁵ This interest subsequently grew following the agreement reached in October 2025 between South Korea and the United States authorizing Seoul to develop SSNs with the transfer of US technology. Defense Minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi thus stated that Japan must explore this possibility, in a regional environment marked by the rapid expansion of Chinese capabilities and North Korean efforts in this area.⁶⁶ The October 2025 coalition agreement between the LDP and the Innovation Party also contains a clause to this effect.⁶⁷

The tactical appeal of such capabilities is real: SSNs offer superior endurance, stealth, and speed compared to conventional diesel-electric submarines and would be a valuable tool for strengthening surveillance of Chinese maritime activities. The Japanese government's cautious rhetoric can be explained—beyond domestic Japanese politics—by the intense international controversy surrounding nonproliferation safeguards in the event of a transfer of this technology from a nuclear-armed state to a non-nuclear-armed state, with China demonstrating strong hostility toward the AUKUS partnership as well as the potential establishment of similar arrangements in Northeast Asia.

Furthermore, substantial obstacles remain. Legally, a revision of Japan's 1955 Atomic Energy Act would be necessary. From an industrial standpoint, there are numerous questions: developing a domestic supply chain, acquiring US technologies despite the considerable delays this option would entail, or issuing a call for bids open to other partners? In addition to these constraints, issues of cost and of local acceptance also arise, as opposition to the establishment of such construction sites poses a definite political risk in certain regions.⁶⁸

It is, however, likely that Seoul's gradual progress toward acquiring SSNs will increase pressure on Tokyo—not only for operational reasons but also to avoid coming in last in what increasingly resembles a regional race for SSNs.

65. T. Ono and M. Sato, “Experts Support New SDF Subs Powered by Nuclear Reactor,” *The Asahi Shimbun*, September 19, 2025, available at: www.asahi.com.

66. K. Takahashi, “Japan Weighs Nuclear Submarines as New Defense Minister Koizumi Signals Break from Postwar Nuclear Taboo,” *Naval News*, November 12, 2025, available at: www.navalnews.com.

67. M. Sato and R. Kiyomiya, “Japan Eyes Nuclear Subs after US Gives OK to S. Korea,” *The Asahi Shimbun*, November 7, 2025, available at: www.asahi.com.

68. G. Dominguez, “Japan Is Considering Nuclear Subs. But Are They Worth the Costs?”, *The Japan Times*, January 28, 2026, available at: www.japantimes.co.jp.

Conclusion

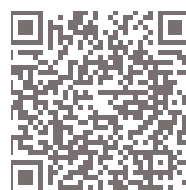
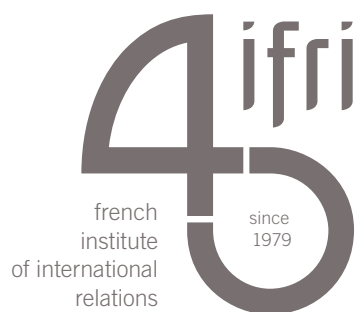
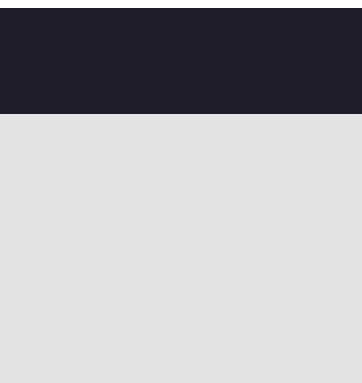
Faced with China, North Korea, and Russia, Japan has for several years chosen to strengthen the overall deterrence of its alliance with the United States by developing its conventional capabilities and deepening cooperation within the framework of extended deterrence. While certain statements in favor of developing nuclear weapons persist in public debate, they should not be interpreted as an indication of a genuine desire for proliferation, as this option remains unrealistic given structural constraints.

Debates on the non-introduction principle, nuclear sharing, and naval nuclear propulsion reflect this desire to strengthen deterrence within the alliance. Japan's nuclear weapons policy, however, remains constrained by expectations tied to the logic of disarmament—deeply rooted in Japanese society—which have led successive governments to prioritize gradual adjustments over sudden shifts.

Looking ahead to the revision of the *National Security Strategy* in late 2026, two trends deserve particular attention: the development of a doctrine for the use of counterstrike capabilities and their integration into extended deterrence, as well as the evolution (whether formal or informal) of the non-introduction principle. It is within this space between the letter of non-nuclear principles and the reality of deterrence imperatives that the evolution of Japan's nuclear weapons policy is now playing out.

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