

Japan under US Extended Nuclear Deterrence

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Extended Nuclear Deterrence has been one important element of the broader US security policy towards East Asia. For a long time, Japan had left nuclear security in the hands of the US and was ambivalent in pursuing it as an option. Though it showed occasional concern on the subject, it did not pursue it. At the end of the war, Japan was a battered country and too weak to take care of its own security responsibilities. The Japanese Government decided to enter into a security pact with the US that would ensure its external security. The Japan-US security alliance is now 64 years old and as such it is one of the longest alliances in the post-Second World War diplomatic history. Forged at the height of the cold war, the alliance was revised once in 1960 and since then it has continued to serve the strategic interests of both countries. Though not modified formally to suit the needs of the changing needs of the post cold war years, both countries have broadened the role of the alliance by means of reinterpretations of its provisions as well as adopting new policies.

National security, a divisive subject:

National security from the beginning was a divisive subject in Japan with extended nuclear deterrence as an important component. In the early decades, three schools of thought with differing security perspectives emerged and one could observe them even today in Japanese politics. (1) The first group advocated pacifism and strongly adhered to the anti-war and anti-military provisions of the Constitution. (2) The second group was composed of revisionists who argued that Japan should become a 'normal' state and rely on its own strength for its defence. (3) In the middle was the mainstream that believed that the best approach was to rebuild Japan's economic strength while depending on the US for its security. There was consensus on the position taken by the third group which stayed in power from 1955 until the early 1990's.

Anti-nuclear weapons sentiment:

For fifty years since the peace treaty, successive Japanese governments have carefully avoided involvements with US nuclear strategy. This was due to the strong anti-nuclear sentiments prevailing in the country. Even the Basic Policy for National Defence of 1957 carried no mention of US nuclear deterrence. In 1967, Japan adopted its three non-nuclear principles – not to produce, not to possess and not to bring nuclear weapons into Japan. During the 1960s, Japan was also deeply involved in the NPT negotiations. In 1970, it signed the NPT, but waited until 1976 to ratify it. In the intervening years, it was making all efforts to ensure that the US underpinned Japan's security by extending nuclear deterrence. In 1998, It was the first country to sign the additional protocol of the IAEA. It strongly supported and ratified the CTBT. In 1970 when the Japanese Government was negotiating with Washington on the issue of Okinawa's reversion, Tokyo gave top priority to the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from the islands. Successive Japanese governments seem to have been more concerned about the strong anti-nuclear public sentiment than about the credibility of the US extended nuclear deterrence. In other words, they presented the picture of being demurring recipients of the US extended nuclear deterrence. The same impression is reflected in the National Defence Policy Outline of 1976 and 1995 and later the National Defence Policy Guidelines (NDPG) of 2004.

In contrast, for the first time, the Japanese government extended positive support for US extended nuclear deterrence in the NDPG of 2010 and 2013. 2010 NDPG called the US nuclear deterrent a vital element. The 2013 NDPG states, “With regard to threat of nuclear weapons, the extended deterrence of the US with nuclear deterrence at its core is indispensable. In order to maintain and enhance the credibility of the extended deterrence, Japan will work closely with the US and take appropriate measures through its own efforts, including ballistic missile defence (BMD) and protection of the people.”

But it does not mean that the anti-nuclear sentiment had weakened. To be sure, the Fukushima tragedy of March 2011 had heightened the negative sentiments about the nuclear energy. The real reason should be seen in the deep security concerns caused by North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missile development and the Japanese started moving in the direction of favouring stronger security cooperation with the US. The Taepodong missile launch in 1998 prompted Tokyo to strengthen BMD cooperation with the US. Similarly Pyongyang’s nuclear tests in 2006, 2013 and 2016 brought about a significant change in the Japanese security perceptions.

The Japanese talk about North Korea, but they worry about China. The dramatic growth of China’s economic and military power and its willingness to project its power in regions very close to Japan contributed even more to the changes in Japanese attitude towards the US deterrence. China’s prolonged and increasing maritime activities in the East and South China seas are considered as posing a real threat to Japan’s territorial sovereignty and commercial interests. Further, Washington’s firm confirmation to carry out its treaty obligations in defending the Senkaku islands (Daiyoyutai for the Chinese) has reassured the Japanese and enhanced the credibility of its deterrence.

China poses long term strategic challenges to both the US and Japan. Both see a need to hedge against the growing threats from China. In addition, they also cooperate with like-minded friends like Australia and India.

Need for a common deterrence strategy:

It is necessary for Japan to participate in a common deterrence strategy. It would provide the Japanese government with means and opportunities to know the US deterrence strategy better. The declining American budget for defence is another worrisome matter for Japan, but the same can provide opportunities for Japan assist the joint strategy. Significantly, Japan’s defence budget has been increasing since 2013 under PM Abe. Japan can also help in matters like increasing its host nation contribution and using ODA for common strategic purposes. The National Security Strategy (NSS) expressed Japan’s preparedness to cooperate with the US in areas like joint training, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities, joint/shared use of facilities by the two countries’ forces, operational and policy coordination and security cooperation in broad areas like BMD, sea, outer space, cyberspace and large scale disaster response.

The following developments will have a great bearing on Japan’s attitude and contribution to US extended nuclear deterrence in the coming years.

- New Guidelines for US-Japan Defence Cooperation (2015)

- Importance of PM Abe's new legislation on the reinterpretation of the collective-self defence provisions of the Constitution.
- PM Abe's new opportunity for Constitutional amendments now that he enjoys two thirds majority in both houses of parliament, a pre-requisite for constitutional amendments. What is the way ahead?
- Japan's participation in the extended deterrence dialogue (EDD) institutionalised since 2010. It is now a biannual event with one of the meetings often involving a visit to a deterrence infrastructure site.
- EDD has deepened Japan's understanding of extended deterrence and provided a better appreciation of the role played by conventional forces and missile defence.

Remarks delivered by Prof. K. V. Kesavan on 71st Remembrance of "Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" held on 9th August, 2016 at the Indian Pugwash Society.