The Straits Times

Asia - Asia

Will Japan go nuclear?

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856 words
23 October 2006
Straits Times
English
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Nuclear taboo no longer bothers many politicians

CANBERRA - IN OCTOBER 1999, Japan's vice-d efence minister Shingo Nishimura sparked a national controversy when he said Tokyo should consider going nuclear.

He was rebuked by then prime minister Keizo Obuchi and ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) boss Ichiro Ozawa and was promptly sacked.

In recent months, top Japanese officials have rehashed the same comments made by Mr Nishimura seven years ago.

That they suffered little detriment to their careers illustrates how political opposition against nuclear weapons has softened.

And it could have further weakened since North Korea conducted its first-ever nuclear test earlier this month.

Last month, former premier Yasuhiro Nakasone - seen to be Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's foreign policy mentor - said Japan needed to study the nuclear option as America's guarantee of a nuclear shield for Japan might not last forever.

Speaking on a weekend TV show recently, LDP policy chief Shoichi Nakagawa said the possession of nuclear weapons could prevent Japan from being attacked.

On Wednesday, Foreign Minister Taro Aso chimed in, saying that it was 'important' that Japan debate the nuclear option. But he also stressed that Japan had no immediate plans to go nuclear.

The comments were flatly rejected by Mr Abe, who stressed that Japan's nuclear debate was 'finished' - which means 'closed'.

Almost at the same time, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters that Washington would 'fully recognise' its defence commitments to Japan.

This was an overt diplomatic code for indicating that Washington would respond, with nuclear weapons if needed, if Japan were attacked.

But Dr Rice's near-open declaration of Washington's commitment to Japan sounded hollow.

Sceptics say the best deterrent threats need no proclamations.

For example, US officials would never need to tell - in bright neon lights - their enemies that nuclear attacks on New York or Washington are unacceptable.

Washington's repeated declarations of its commitment only raise questions about the commitment itself, they add.

One only needs to look back into recent history to conclude how attractive the nuclear option has become to Japanese officials.

In 2002, Mr Ozawa - who in 1999 rebuked the errant Mr Nishimura - told Chinese leaders that Japan had the potential to develop thousands of nuclear weapons at short notice and that Japan 'will never be beaten in terms of military power'.

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In the same year, Mr Abe - then deputy chief Cabinet secretary - created political shock waves when he claimed it was 'not necessarily unconstitutional' for Tokyo to deploy tactical nuclear weapons.

Political rhetoric aside, there is a compelling case for Japan's acquisition of nuclear weapons.

According to the experts, Japan has consistently perceived a 'credibility gap' in Washington's extended deterrence posture for Japan - a sophisticated way of saying that Japan does not fully trust the US nuclear umbrella to shield it from a barrage of North Korea missiles.

Historically, extended deterrence has suffered from a gnawing credibility deficit.

The logic is intuitively simple: In a confrontation with a nuclear-armed state, would the US risk Los Angeles or New York for Tokyo?

It does not take a political scientist to answer that.

During the Cold War, there was widespread concern in the US that the threat to use nuclear weapons to deter a Soviet conventional attack on Western Europe was irrational, even incredible.

The reason: Such a threat would have invited a Soviet nuclear strike on the American homeland - a catastrophe of monumental proportions.

It was precisely this concern that pushed Britain and France towards developing their own nuclear deterrents against the Soviet Union.

Facing the Soviet threat in 1954, Britain's Air Defence Subcommittee noted that once 'New York is vulnerable to retaliation, the US will not use her strategic weapon in defence of London'.

According to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, Japan - with its civilian nuclear base and sufficient stocks of plutonium - could develop a nuclear weapon in between two and six months.

But the growing debate does not mean that Japan will get its nukes tomorrow.

With Hiroshima and Nagasaki seared into their collective memory, the Japanese are still staunchly anti-nuclear.

The nuclear taboo is so strong that American nuclear-armed ships are not allowed to dock at any Japanese port.

And while many Americans retain fond memories of the 1950s movie Godzilla, the Japanese use the radiation-mutated beast in the hit movie as a lesson on why nuclear weapons should be rejected outright.

Moreover, the securing of nuclear weapons would invite a fusillade of criticism from South Korea and China and intensify an arms race already set in motion by Pyongyang's recent nuclear test.

'Public opinion won't allow nuclear weapons,' Mr Yasuhiro Okudaira, a member of a group that seeks to preserve Japan's pacifist Constitution, told the Los Angeles Times.

'We have an anti-nuclear consciousness that was nurtured by Article 9,' he said, referring to the war-renouncing article of Japan's Constitution.

'Even Mr Abe changed his thinking after becoming Prime Minister.'

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