

Summary: The debate within the NATO alliance on nuclear issues is increasingly seen to be of direct relevance to Japan. In both cases, the issues being debated include the future role of tactical U.S. nuclear weapons and consultative mechanisms with Washington. The common concern is whether the United States requires specific weapon systems to maintain the confidence of allies. In both NATO and the U.S.-Japan alliance, expanding consultations to include non-nuclear elements such as missile defense would strengthen existing relations. Additionally, by sharing their understanding of nuclear issues with one another, experts in the United States and its allied countries could help create a basis on which the credibility of extended deterrence can be maintained.

Why the NATO Nuclear Debate Is Relevant to Japan and Vice Versa

by Michito Tsuruoka¹

In considering ways to maintain — and hopefully enhance — the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence over Japan, it is not surprising that Japanese experts have turned their attention to Europe, where the issue of extended deterrence has been discussed vigorously over the past several decades. Given that the strategic environments of Europe and Japan are considerably different from one another, there are certainly inherent limitations to any direct comparison between the two cases. That said, the debate within the NATO alliance on nuclear issues is increasingly seen to be of direct relevance to Japan's concerns. Moreover, the link is not a one-way street: Japan's debate on nuclear weapons, not least in the context of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, seems relevant to Europe as well. In both directions, the issues being debated include the future role of tactical U.S. nuclear weapons and consultative mechanisms with Washington.

Different Fates: The B-61 and TLAM-N

In the European theatre, what is now gaining much attention is the future of tactical nuclear weapons — B-61 gravity bombs — deployed in selected NATO countries. The presence of these weapons has long been regarded as the most visible expression of U.S. resolve on extended nuclear deterrence over Europe. However, a number of analysts and politicians are now arguing that those weapons are useless in military terms. Critics such as German Vice-Chancellor and Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle have been calling increasingly for their withdrawal, particularly after U.S. President Barack Obama announced his initiative on nuclear disarmament at his seminal speech in Prague in April 2009.

Whereas the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review Report (NPR) released in April 2010 postponed a decision on the future of the B-61 in Europe, it did announce Washington's decision to retire nuclear-tipped Tomahawk cruise missiles (or TLAM-N). There have been some debates both in Japan and the United States about the potential

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implications of its retirement to extended deterrence. Some Japanese officials have reportedly expressed their concern that the missile's retirement would mean the loss of the most visible pillar of U.S. nuclear deterrence in the region.

On the occasion of the previous NPR under the George W. Bush administration in 2001, Washington is reported to have explained to Tokyo that it would maintain TLAM-N primarily to reassure Japan. The latest NPR, however, argues that TLAM-N “can be adequately substituted” by “other means” including strategic nuclear forces (ICBMs and SLBMs) and the forward deployment of nuclear capable bombers and fighters in times of crisis. It provides no explanation as to how the regional security situation has evolved since the previous NPR to make the TLAM-N unnecessary. Certainly the security situation has not appreciably improved, nor have the United States' missile and forward basing capabilities.

There are considerable differences between the B-61 and TLAM-N. The former is physically deployed in Europe, while the latter has never been deployed in the region and is held in storage in the United States since the early 1990s. Moreover, whereas the B-61 can be delivered using the dual-capable aircrafts (DCA) of European allies in times of war, Japan has no role in operational planning for TLAM-N, let alone actually using it. The argument that the B-61 deployment in Europe takes into account the Russian tactical nuclear weapon arsenal can similarly be applied to the Asian theatre, where China has a number of nonstrategic nuclear weapons, including short- and medium-range missiles that can be used against U.S. allies in the region.

Are Specific Weapon Systems So Important?

The central concern, in both cases, is whether the United States requires specific weapon systems to maintain the confidence of allies in its extended deterrence. The 2010 NPR does not explain why “other means” of nuclear weapons — bombers, fighters, ICBMs, and SLBMs — can substitute the role of TLAM-N, but not the B-61. It is true that the existence of the B-61 and DCA in NATO's framework has a symbolic importance related to the essence of alliance solidarity. This goes beyond strictly operational and military logic. Now that the presence of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe is being seriously questioned, the United States needs to provide a more coherent argument as to

why the B-61 cannot be substituted. Both European and American proponents of the withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from Europe have pointed to credible extended deterrence being maintained in Asia without the presence of such weapons on Japanese or South Korean soil. Washington's ambiguity on the reasons for its differentiated attitude to the B-61 and to TLAM-N would have potential repercussions for Japan as well regardless of the military usefulness of TLAM-N itself. To those concerned about TLAM-N retirement, the news that the B-61 will remain in Europe — implying that the weapon cannot be substituted — hardly sends a reassuring message.

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Beyond the unique historical and political arguments for continuing to deploy the B-61 in Europe, a more fundamental challenge for the United States is how to contemplate a new extended deterrence posture without tactical nuclear weapons, and how to include such weapons in a future nuclear disarmament agenda with Russia (and in the long term, with China as well). Given that Russian tactical nuclear weapons are believed to have been deployed not only in the European theatre, but also in the Far East, any U.S.-Russian disarmament negotiations on tactical nuclear weapons will be a matter of concern to Japan and other Asian countries as well. As in the case of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) negotiations during the 1980s, when Japan lobbied hard for a global approach, Tokyo needs to ensure that a potential deal will not have adverse effects on the Asian security situation.

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Nuclear Consultation With and Without Nuclear-Sharing

Another aspect of mutual relevance for NATO and Japan is the question of how the United States can conduct nuclear consultations with its allies. Consultations within NATO are based upon the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), where, other than France, practically all the allies — not only countries hosting the B-61 or operating DCA — discuss NATO's nuclear policy. The U.S.-Japan alliance does not have a similarly established framework to discuss nuclear issues. As late as 2009, the two governments began a preliminary dialogue on deterrence (which included a nuclear element) and they seem willing to develop it further.

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The biggest difference between the NPG and the U.S.-Japan dialogue is that while the former is based on NATO's nuclear-sharing mechanism involving the B-61, the latter lacks such a physical element. The NPG is meant to manage the alliance's unique scheme of nuclear risk- and responsibility-sharing. That said, however, nuclear consultation in both cases can be seen as a means to help maintain the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence. In this context, more and more Japanese officials and experts are getting interested in the NPG mechanism, although this does not mean that any — except perhaps those espousing certain extreme views — are interested in introducing a NATO-like nuclear-sharing mechanism to Japan. It may just be natural for Japanese to look at the NPG given that there is arguably no other model that Japan can think of when considering nuclear talks with Washington. As long as the NPG is not exclusively about planning surrounding the B-61 and the DCA, there are things that Japan can learn from the NPG, short of replicating it. Although the work of the NPG is not

entirely in the public domain, it is believed to be a venue for discussions on arms control, nonproliferation and the overall nuclear posture of the alliance, as well as technical issues surrounding the safety, security, and survivability of nuclear weapons and communications and information systems regarding the B-61 and the DCA. Under the NPG, there are a few advisory and subordinate bodies including the NPG Staff Group and the High Level Group (HLG).

To be sure, the NPG may not be a perfect instrument in terms of involving Europeans in the development of U.S. nuclear policy and reassuring the allies. Since the NPG's inception, a certain level of ambiguity has always been observed regarding the extent to which Washington is prepared to share operational planning information with its NATO allies. But the Obama administration's renewed emphasis on relations with allies can be expected to improve the quality and the depth of nuclear consultations with both NATO and Japan.

The process that led up to the release of the 2010 NPR appears promising. Washington conducted an unprecedented level of advance consultation with a number of allies and partners around the world. There is a strong consensus in Tokyo that it was well informed and adequately consulted regarding the NPR, and officials are generally satisfied by the way the Obama administration handled the process. As a result of this, Tokyo's concerns regarding the United States' nuclear posture, not least its adverse implications for extended deterrence, have almost disappeared. In Europe, too, while there are voices that criticize certain aspects of the NPR, dissatisfaction about the consultation process itself is not often heard.

At first glance, it appears there is no reason for NATO allies to look at the case of U.S.-Japan dialogue on nuclear issues because NATO's scheme is far more developed. However, at least in the long term, — especially when considering the future possibility of the withdrawal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons — the U.S.-Japan relationship ought to be of interest to NATO as well, as Japan and the United States are trying to develop a new mode of nuclear consultation not based on nuclear-sharing. To be sure, nuclear consultation in NATO involves some aspects of this, as non-DCA countries in NATO participate in the NPG and the framework is more than just about the management of the nuclear-sharing mechanism. However, some European officials and

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experts are fearful that the NPG will become nothing more than a “tea ceremony” should NATO lose nuclear-sharing: it is very conceivable that Washington would consequently deem it less necessary to discuss nuclear issues with its NATO allies.

Contemplating nuclear consultations without relying on the physical element of nuclear sharing is therefore going to be a serious challenge for NATO. So far, there is no consensus within the alliance about how the role and practice of the NPG would evolve after the possible future withdrawal of the B-61 — though such an eventuality may not come about anytime soon, judging from the current state of NATO discussions on the subject. In addition, even without U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe, the nuclear forces of the United Kingdom will remain committed to the “common defense” of the alliance under the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), the top NATO commander. Although different, French nuclear forces can also be seen in the overall context of a regional deterrence posture in Europe. The fact that there are regional nuclear powers that are also U.S. allies will remain one of the most important features distinguishing the European context from the East Asian one.

Nuclear Consultation in a Broader Context

Irrespective of the future of the B-61 in Europe, the key to any substantive nuclear consultation for U.S. allies, whether NATO or Japan, is how to maintain and hopefully enhance Washington’s willingness to discuss nuclear issues and to share relevant information with its allies. One possible way would be to place nuclear consultations in a broader framework of deterrence that includes nonnuclear elements like missile defense capabilities and conventional weapons. The role of nuclear weapons cannot be understood in isolation from such nonnuclear factors, without which no whole picture of deterrence posture can be drawn. Whether one likes it or not, the United States makes a clear case for a more direct link between the role of nuclear weapons and nonnuclear capabilities. For instance, the Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report of February 2010 argues unequivocally that the role of nuclear weapons “can be reduced by increasing the role of missile defense and other capabilities.”

Given this reality, if NATO decides to develop an alliance-wide missile defense system as an important part of its

overall deterrence posture, it would be unwise to continue discussing nuclear deterrence and missile defense separately. Aside from the technical issues involving B-61 operational management, the NPG might well be restructured into a framework that could be called a deterrence posture committee or group. An additional benefit of this is that it would make it easier for France to participate. Also, this would avoid making the NPG obsolete.

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In the U.S.-Japan context, as long as the dialogue is limited to nuclear issues, nothing more than a low-level one-way street of information sharing from Washington to Tokyo can be expected. Certainly, no form of risk- and responsibility-sharing between the two countries can be seriously contemplated. Nevertheless, if a missile defense element or any other components of the U.S.-Japan alliance’s overall deterrence posture were brought in, Japan would perhaps play a greater role. In fact, the Japanese government’s view has always been to discuss nuclear issues in a broader setting: thus Tokyo often calls it a “deterrence dialogue” rather than nuclear consultation. At the same time, by including missile defense and other nonnuclear elements in the overall deterrence discussion, the whole picture would become more than just one of consultation, although it would still be well short of joint decision-making on nuclear weapons, unlike the NATO model of “dual-key.”

In addition to official government-to-government talks between officials and leaders, there is also a need for dialogue outside government involving experts. By sharing their understanding of nuclear issues, especially concerning how deterrence works and how to hedge against possible deterrence failure, experts in the United States and its allied

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countries could help create a basis on which the credibility of extended deterrence can be maintained. Also, like the physical existence of nuclear weapons themselves, the value of consultation on nuclear and nonnuclear issues — both governmental and nongovernmental — can be enhanced by making it visible. Sending a message to the outside world that the United States and its allies have a unified view on nuclear deterrence contributes a lot to the overall effectiveness of extended deterrence in practice.

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During the Cold War, discussions on nuclear weapons and extended deterrence in Europe and those in Japan and in other parts of Asia were conducted separately with few interactions. Strategic communities in Europe and Japan simply did not have to know one another. But such a period has finally come to an end. An idea of NATO-Japan nuclear or deterrence dialogue is not inconceivable today. Despite considerable differences in their respective security situations, the two communities face similar challenges concerning extended deterrence. For the United States, more dialogue between NATO and Japan would mean bringing the transatlantic policy community and Asia policy community in Washington closer. Given that the two communities have rarely interacted before, this might create fresh perspectives and new policy dynamics.

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