

Japan's plutonium paradox

The country says it will work with US to promote nuclear disarmament yet possesses surplus of weapons-grade material

The day after the United States released its Nuclear Posture Review on Feb 2, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono issued a statement claiming that Japan highly appreciates the latest NPR. He said it clearly articulates the US resolve to ensure the effectiveness of its deterrence and its commitment to providing extended deterrence to its allies including Japan.



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The statement said Japan shares with the US the same recognition of a severe international security environment, which has rapidly worsened since the release of the previous 2010 NPR, in particular by continued development of nuclear and missile programs by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Japan will strengthen the deterrence of the Japan-US alliance by closely consulting on the extended deterrence, including nuclear deterrence, through the Japan-US Extended Deterrence Dialogue and other consultations, Kono said.

The statement added that Japan will continue to closely cooperate with the US to promote realistic and tangible nuclear disarmament while appropriately addressing the actual security threats.

But when Beatrice Fihn, executive director of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), visited Japan recently, she was denied a meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Visiting Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Fihn called on Japan, the only country to be attacked with atomic bombs, to play a leading role in the movement toward the abolition of nuclear weapons.

It is not difficult to understand why Abe shunned Fihn. She has appealed to the Japanese government to join the nuclear weapons ban treaty.

Also, Japan and the US on Jan 17 allowed their agreement on nuclear cooperation to renew automatically when it expires in July. The pact, which was signed in 1988, gives Japan blanket approval to reprocess spent nuclear fuel for weapons-grade plutonium.

Japan was an early adopter of nuclear power in the 1950s, at the urging of the US. The US began engaging with Japan on nuclear energy following the end of World War II. The US was eager to promote and sell its nuclear reactor technology around the world.

Japan had to return some 300 kilograms of plutonium, provided by the US, Britain and France decades ago for what was described as research purposes, to the US in 2016. Thanks to the US-Japan cooperation agreement

on peaceful uses of nuclear energy, Japan now owns 48 tons of separated plutonium, most of which is in Europe, where it was reprocessed. And Japan has no clearly defined use for this large amount of nuclear material.

Japan once hoped fast reactors would help meet its energy security needs, take care of its surplus plutonium and solve its spent fuel problem. But that hope has faded. Commercializing of fast reactors is still decades away.

Resource-poor Japan relies almost entirely on foreign imports for all fossil fuels such as coal, crude oil and natural gas. The Long-term Energy Supply and Demand Outlook that Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry released in July 2015 included targets for Japan's electric power supply demand structure in fiscal year 2030, with renewables to account for a 22-24 percent share of the country's energy mix and nuclear energy 20-22 percent.

Nonetheless, according to the Japan Atomic Energy Commission, the primary energy self-sufficiency ratio (including nuclear power generation) is roughly 25 percent, which is lower than that of other advanced industrialized countries.

Surplus weapons-grade material has always worried arms control experts. In 1977, believing that nuclear weapons could be made from plutonium extracted from spent nuclear fuel in Japan's light water reactors, the US conveyed its

view to Tokyo, according to Japanese diplomatic documents declassified in 2013.

Now, despite having surplus plutonium, Japan is planning to open a massive spent reactor fuel reprocessing plant at Rokkasho, the country's large commercial reprocessing facility, in the fall of 2018.

It is designed to produce 8,000 kg of weapons-usable plutonium — enough to make 1,000 nuclear weapons a year, according to International Atomic Energy Agency standards. The ostensible reason for operating the plant is recycling spent fuel to supply power reactors and a fast reactor.

In their co-authored *Foreign Policy* article published on Aug 17, 2017, Henry Sokolski, executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, and William Tobey, a senior fellow at Harvard Kennedy School, said Japan has five reactors on line and terminated its only fast reactor project. There is no way the country can operate Rokkasho in northern Japan without piling up tons of plutonium for years on end.

The startup of Rokkasho would add significantly to Japan's existing plutonium surplus. A potential linkage between Rokkasho's product and nuclear weapons has hung over the program from the start. Japan will only be able to burn a fraction of the amount of nuclear material extracted there.

The Static Experiment Criti-

cal Facility in Ibaraki prefecture cleared the Nuclear Regulation Authority's safety review on Jan 31, becoming the first reactor run by the government-affiliated Japan Atomic Energy Agency to pass post-Fukushima regulations.

It will be used to conduct research on the extraction of melted fuel from nuclear plants.

The agency said it will not use plutonium-uranium mixed oxide fuel, known as MOX fuel, "other than for peaceful purposes".

While Japanese reprocessing plants would be producing reactor-grade plutonium, it nevertheless has significant weapons potential.

Japan has a "three Nos" national policy on nuclear weapons: No possession, no manufacture, and no allowing nuclear weapons on Japanese territory. But there is no lack of Japanese politicians talking about nuclear weapons.

Former Japanese defense minister Shigeru Ishiba, seen as a possible successor to Abe, said in September that Japan should have the technology to build a nuclear weapon if it wants to do so. He added, though, that he is not taking the position that Japan should have nuclear weapons.

Japan's plutonium surplus goes against its principle of not possessing the material without a specified purpose.

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West must discard 'China threat' theory

The correct approach is to embrace a positive-sum mentality and the spirit of openness

By LIANG JUNQIAN and HAO WEIWEI

The "China threat" theory is not new. Its recent resurgence reflects the growing anxiety in the West over China's peaceful rise in a fast-changing world.

Some US National Security Council officials urged the Donald Trump administration to centralize its 5G mobile network to "counter the threat of China spying on phone calls"; inviting opposition from US communications regulators, wireless companies and many lawmakers.

And earlier last month, some Australian politicians criticized

China for providing loans to Pacific island countries on unfavorable terms, yet they were strongly rebuked by officials from those very island countries. Other Western countries such as Germany, France and Italy are also trying to more strictly scrutinize investments from China.

Instead of putting China under a microscope to determine the "level of threat" it poses, the Western powers should find new prescriptions to revitalize themselves and overcome their sense of loss in an interdependent world in the face of China's fast development.

For decades, elites in the West have believed that the Western-style democratic political system com-

bined with a free market economy is the best form of governance.

Since the end of the Cold War, the US-led "liberal world order", which to the West is ideal for global governance, has enjoyed uncontested superiority in every domain. But now, as Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the *Russia in Global Affairs* journal, said, the US has returned to "the Cold War-era inertia"; seeing a world full of threats rather than opportunities.

Now, the West-dominated world order that has existed for more than 200 years needs to be refashioned. The rise of China, whose political, economic and ideological systems are different from those of the West, has unsettled many.

Western countries are, in one way or another, uncomfortable with their own illusion that some other country is going to take their place and replace the "old set of rules" with its own.

But the China skeptics need to understand that China has no intention of pulling down the existing world order and building a new one based on its own propositions. What China wants to do is to shoulder its share of responsibilities as a major country, work together with other countries to improve global governance and make it serve not just the Western powers but all other countries as well.

At the World Economic Forum last month in Davos, Switzerland,

China clearly stated its determination to stay on the track of reform and opening-up, saying bolder reform measures will create more opportunities for the rest of the world.

More than two centuries ago, the West managed to become the global leader by applying the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution to the rest of the world. History progresses with the times. So the West needs to stop looking at China through ideological lenses, and embrace a positive-sum mentality and the spirit of openness.

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