



# JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

Center for Strategic and International Studies ■ Washington, D.C.

December 14, 2006

## Japan's Nuclear Debate: To Be Continued?

Nicholas Szechenyi<sup>1</sup>

*Six days after North Korea's October 9 nuclear test, Shoichi Nakagawa, the policy chief of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), declared in a television appearance that Japan should discuss the nuclear option. Foreign Minister Taro Aso echoed these sentiments a few days later, just as Condoleezza Rice arrived in Tokyo to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to the nuclear umbrella. Predictably, Nakagawa and Aso sparked a controversy in the only country to have suffered a nuclear attack. Surprisingly, recent public opinion polls reveal some interest in a nuclear debate despite steadfast support for a longstanding government stance against nuclear armament. The public's willingness to juxtapose these seemingly incongruous positions could signal increased sympathy for the notion that such a colloquy is in Japan's national interests.*

### Misleading Signals vs. Freedom of Speech

While Nakagawa and Aso do believe that Japan should be free to discuss nuclear weapons in the context of an evolving security-policy debate, they support Japan's three longstanding nonnuclear principles (not to develop, possess, or allow entry of nuclear weapons) and have not advocated a change in government policy.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, they were criticized for sending misleading signals amid heightened concerns about a regional arms race.<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sought to de-escalate the situation by stating repeatedly that Japan has no interest in developing its own nuclear weapons, but that did not prevent opposition parties from demanding Aso's resignation and pressuring Abe to rein in Nakagawa and other hawkish members of the LDP.<sup>4</sup> Nakagawa then raised eyebrows in another media interview when he quipped, "It's as if there are four 'nonnuclear principles,' with the final one being 'don't discuss it.'"<sup>5</sup> Aso also has stood firm, noting that "if such a discussion is blocked, it would be criticized as the suppression of freedom of speech."<sup>6</sup> It's quite clear that the "discussion" about the propriety of a nuclear debate is ongoing; whether the public will benefit from a substantive exchange remains an open question.

### A Debate Renewed

Japan has contemplated the nuclear option in the past. For example, a study conducted after the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1994 concluded that a nuclear arsenal makes little strategic sense given the negative impact it would have on the nonproliferation regime, presumed countermeasures on the part of Japan's neighbors, and strain on the alliance with the United States.<sup>7</sup> North Korea's latest provocation also reinforced the argument that a nuclear Japan would suffer the same fate as Kim Jong Il's regime: increased isolation from the international community.<sup>8</sup> The so-called "nuclear allergy" stemming from Hiroshima and Nagasaki further explains why the government has not favored nuclear armament despite an intensifying threat close to home.<sup>9</sup> That hasn't deterred some conservatives, particularly in the United States, from

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Szechenyi is a fellow with the CSIS Japan Chair.

<sup>2</sup> "Freedom of Speech at Issue in Nuclear Debate," *Daily Yomiuri* (Tokyo), November 8, 2006, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> "Japan's Nuclear Debate," *Asahi Shimbun* (Tokyo), October 21, 2006, [www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200610210133.html](http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200610210133.html).

<sup>4</sup> Kana Inagaki, "Japan Opposition Calls for Foreign Minister's Resignation over Nuke Weapons Comments," Associated Press Worldstream, November 9, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Lies, "Japan Policy Chief Wants China 'Discipline,'" Reuters, November 13, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> "Freedom of Speech at Issue in Nuclear Debate," *Daily Yomiuri* (Tokyo), November 8, 2006, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Brad Glosserman, "Straight Talk about Japan's Nuclear Option," Pacific Forum CSIS, *PacNet*, no. 50A, October 11, 2006, <http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/pac0650a.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Yukio Okamoto, "Kaku Giron Ze Ka Hi Ka," *Sankei Shimbun* (Tokyo), November 8, 2006, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Duncan Currie, "Atomic Balm: Why Japan Won't Soon Go Nuclear," *Daily Standard* (D.C.), October 18, 2006, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/012/831zhwlx.asp>.

discussing a nuclear Japan “as if the worst possible consequence of nuclear weapons in the hands of one of America’s direst enemies would be the acquisition of nuclear weapons by one of America’s best friends.”<sup>10</sup> Proponents contend that considering the nuclear option could compel China to exert more pressure on Kim Jong Il and could thus have the best chance of reversing his nuclear programs.<sup>11</sup> They argue that a transparent national debate expounding on these and other arguments could serve a noble purpose: improved public awareness of Japan’s security challenges.

## Public Interest

Though somewhat cautious, the Japanese public could be warming up to the notion of a nuclear debate. A Yomiuri poll conducted in November 2006 found that 80 percent of respondents supported the three nonnuclear principles, while only 46 percent favored discussing the nuclear option.<sup>12</sup> Another survey issued by Mainichi a week later also found that 80 percent opposed nuclear armament, but 61 percent did not object to a debate.<sup>13</sup> Revisiting the nuclear option might prove useful not necessarily to make the case for nuclear armament—the public opposes it and Prime Minister Abe has spoken out against that course—but rather to explain the security implications fully and thereby amplify the rationale behind existing government policy. If conducted properly, a national debate “will lay the foundation for a stable and credible national security policy and help establish the consensus needed to implement it.”<sup>14</sup>

## A Nuclear “Genie”?

This latest chapter in Japan’s nuclear debate has fueled speculation about Prime Minister Abe’s real views on security policy. Abe has stressed that the government will not discuss the nuclear option but has also noted that “for the general public to discuss this matter—for example, academics, scholars, or journalists—is the freedom of the Japanese people. I am not in a position of restricting that.”<sup>15</sup> Some suspect that “his failure to rebuke Messrs. Aso and Nakagawa for their comments suggests at least a tacit approval for their attempts to further the Japanese security debate. If not quite out of the bottle yet, then, Japan’s nuclear genie may have started to stir.”<sup>16</sup> The genie may never come out of the bottle, but the nuclear debate could be inevitable given the threat posed by North Korea. If Prime Minister Abe seeks to broaden the discourse on security policy, it is best for him to do so openly and systematically. Moreover, the discussion need not be unilateral. Dialogue with the United States on the extended nuclear deterrent or exchanges with China and South Korea on the nature of the threat could facilitate regional coordination and add depth and breadth to the domestic debate. cursory references to the nuclear issue will only confuse the Japanese public and complicate Abe’s diplomatic agenda. At this point, all one can say with certitude is that the “debate about the debate” will continue.

*The Japan Chair invites other essays for the Platform. Please contact Eri Hirano at (202) 775-3144 or by e-mail at [ehirano@csis.org](mailto:ehirano@csis.org).*

---

**Platform is published by the Office of the Japan Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).**

© 2006 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

<sup>10</sup> David Frum, “Mutually Assured Disruption,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2006, p. A25.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “World War II Is Over,” *Washington Post*, October 20, 2006, p. A21.

<sup>12</sup> “Poll: 80% Support Upholding Japan’s Nonnuclear Principles,” *Daily Yomiuri* (Tokyo), November 21, 2006, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> “Kaku: ‘Hoyuu nou da ga Giron wa Younin’ ga Saita Roku Wari,” *Mainichi Shimbun* (Tokyo), November 27, 2006, [www.gslb.mainichi-msn.co.jp/seiji/feature/news/p20061127k0000m010113000c.html](http://www.gslb.mainichi-msn.co.jp/seiji/feature/news/p20061127k0000m010113000c.html).

<sup>14</sup> Brad Glosserman, “Straight Talk about Japan’s Nuclear Option,” Pacific Forum CSIS, *PacNet*, no. 50A, October 11, 2006, <http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/pac0650a.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Faiola, “Japanese Premier Plans to Fortify U.S. Ties in Meeting with Bush,” *Washington Post*, November 15, 2006, p. A12.

<sup>16</sup> “Japan’s New Leader,” Economist Intelligence Unit ViewsWire, November 27, 2006, [www.economist.com/agenda/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=8341099](http://www.economist.com/agenda/displaystory.cfm?story_id=8341099).