

# Japan: Nuclear arms advocates get bolder amid energy debate

Tuesday 18 September 2012, by [KAGEYAMA Yuri](#) (Date first published: 3 August 2012).

The contentious debate over atomic energy is also bringing another question out of the shadows: Should Japan retain the possibility of making atomic weapons – even if only as an option?

It may seem surprising in the only country to have ever come under nuclear attack, particularly as it prepares to mark the 67<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the Hiroshima A-bombing on Aug. 6 and that of Nagasaki three days later. The government officially renounces nuclear weapons, and the vast majority of citizens oppose them.

But as the nation weighs whether to phase out atomic energy generation, some conservatives, including certain influential politicians and analysts, are becoming more vocal about their belief that Japan should at least not rule out producing a nuclear arsenal in the future.

The two issues are intertwined because nuclear power plants can develop the technology and produce the fuel necessary for such weaponry, as highlighted by concerns that allegedly civilian atomic energy research in Iran is masking a bomb program, as was the case in North Korea.

“Having nuclear plants shows to other nations that Japan can make nuclear arms,” ex-Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba told AP.

Ishiba stressed that Japan isn't about to start making nuclear weapons. But, he said, with North Korea widely thought to be developing nuclear warheads, the nation needs to assert itself and say it can also make them – although it is choosing not to.

Such views make opponents of nuclear weapons nervous.

“A group is starting to take a stand to assert the significance of nuclear plants as military technology, a view that had been kept below the surface until now,” says “Fukushima Project,” a book published by several experts with antinuclear leanings.

Adding to their jitters, the Diet amended the 1955 Atomic Energy Basic Law in June, adding the term “national security” to people's health and wealth as reasons for the possible uses of nuclear technology.

“The recognition that both nuclear issues must be addressed is heightening in Japan” and the link between the two is “becoming increasingly clear,” said Hitoshi Yoshioka, professor of social and cultural studies at Kyushu University.

Yoshioka is part of a government panel investigating the nuclear disaster. The meltdowns at the Fukushima No. 1 power plant have called into question the future of atomic energy in Japan, in turn raising concern among some nuclear weapons advocates.

Most proponents don't claim – at least not publicly – that Japan should possess nuclear weapons. Rather, they argue that their mere ability to serve as a deterrent increases the country's diplomatic

clout.

The issue dates to the 1960s. Historical documents released in the past two years show that the idea of developing nuclear arms was long talked about behind the scenes, despite repeated denials by successive governments. The papers were obtained by NHK in 2010 and more recently by AP under a public records request.

In a previously classified 1966 document, the government outlines how the threat of China going nuclear made it necessary to consider the option, though it concluded that the U.S. nuclear umbrella rendered such a move unnecessary at the time.

In minutes of meetings from 1964, 1966 and 1967, government officials weigh the pros and cons of signing the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which means forgoing the nuclear option. Japan acceded to the accord in 1970.

The government denials continued even after former Liberal Democratic Party Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, who was in office from 1982 to 1987, wrote in his 2004 memoirs that, as director of the now-defunct Defense Agency, he had ordered a secret study of the nation's nuclear arms capability in 1970. The study concluded it would take five years to develop nuclear armaments, but Nakasone decided that they weren't needed, again because of U.S. protection.

After breaking the LDP's half-century grip on power, the Democratic Party of Japan in 2010 reversed the past denials and acknowledged that discussions on the issue had indeed taken place.

Given the secretive nature of the matter to date, former diplomat Tetsuya Endo and others are suspicious about the addition of "national security" to the atomic energy law in June. Backers of the amendment say it refers to protecting nuclear plants from terrorists. If that is the case, opponents ask why the phrasing inserted wasn't "nuclear security" instead of "national security."

Japan has 45 tons of separated plutonium, enough to produce several bombs of the magnitude dropped on Nagasaki - equivalent to roughly 21 kilotons of TNT. Its overall plutonium stockpile of more than 150 tons is one of the world's largest, although considerably smaller than those of the U.S., Russia and Britain.

Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara, an outspoken conservative, has repeatedly stated that Japan should flaunt the nuclear arsenal option to boost its diplomatic leverage. Ex-LDP Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose roughly one-year stint started in September 2006, voiced similar sentiments, but in a more subdued tone.

The Yomiuri Shimbun made a rare mention of the link between nuclear energy and weapons in an editorial defending atomic energy last year, saying Japan's plutonium stockpile "works diplomatically as a nuclear deterrent."

That kind of talk worries Tatsujiro Suzuki, vice chairman at the Japan Atomic Energy Commission. Himself an opponent of proliferation, Suzuki said that developing a nuclear arsenal is a decades-old ambition for some politicians and bureaucrats.

"If people keep saying (that atomic energy) is for having a nuclear weapons capability, that is not good," Suzuki said. "It's not wise. Technically it may be true, but it sends a very bad message to the international community."

YURI KAGEYAMA, AP, Aug. 3, 2012

---

---

**P.S.**

\* <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120803f1.html>