

Japan mulled possessing “defensive” nuke weapons in 1958

Tuesday 26 March 2013, by [Mainichi Shimbun](#) (Date first published: 17 March 2013).

TOKYO (Kyodo) — Japanese officials in 1958 discussed an option for the country to possess “defensive” nuclear weapons to protect against the Soviet Union amid the Cold War and conveyed the talks to the United States, declassified U.S. archives showed Saturday.

That year, the U.S. ambassador to Japan told a meeting with U.S. defense and state department officials that then Japanese Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi had said the nation’s Constitution “did not prohibit Japan from having any kind of weapons” and Kishi believed it was “essential” for Japan to have nuclear arsenals.

Then U.S. Ambassador to Japan Douglas MacArthur II welcomed Japan’s move to study the possession of nuclear weapons, saying Tokyo’s recognition of “the desirability of defensive nuclear weapons is extremely interesting and encouraging.”

According to a telegram dated June 20, 1958, sent from MacArthur to then U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Hisanari Yamada, then Japan’s vice foreign minister, told the envoy that Japanese Foreign Ministry officials discussed whether Tokyo should study and reach a decision on defensive nuclear weapons.

Takashi Shinobu, professor of international politics at Nihon University, found the declassified document at the U.S. National Archives in suburban Washington.

Yamada told MacArthur that there was a growing belief among ministry officials dealing with security matters that it did “not make too much sense for Japanese not to have modern defensive weapons, including nuclear weapons, when the only potential aggressors were armed with nuclear weapons.”

The question in the mind of those officials was “whether the Japanese government should not face up to facts of life and study and reach a considered decision regarding defensive nuclear weapons,” the envoy quoted the vice foreign minister as saying.

Specifically, the Japanese officials are believed to have discussed the deployment of a nuclear warhead fitted to a surface-to-air missile system to avert the Soviet air force’s possible invasion of Japan’s airspace.

Then U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower was relatively tolerant to the possession of nuclear weapons by U.S. allies. Before the entry into force of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1970, which allowed only five nations to have nuclear weapons, there were no international laws banning the possession of such weapons.

In the telegram, MacArthur also said Yamada told him nuclear weapons “raised obvious and serious emotional and psychological problems in terms of Japanese public opinion and perhaps opinion had not evolved to point where there could be any change in present Japanese policy.”

The ambassador commented in the telegram that he doubted then Japanese Foreign Minister Aiiichiro Fujiyama or Kishi “will feel at this time that they are in position, in light of present Japanese public opinion, to make any substantial changes in Japan’s present policy regarding nuclear weapons.”

Antinuclear sentiment was strong among the Japanese public following the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the final days of World War II in August 1945.

MacArthur also said in a meeting between officials of the U.S. state and defense departments on Sept. 9, 1958, that “Kishi believed it was essential that Japan have nuclears,” although he had no intention of bringing in such weapons, according to a declassified memorandum.

P.S.

* Mainichi Shimbun, March 17, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130317p2a00m0na011000c.html>