

Nuclear Hawks in Tokyo Call for Stronger US Nuclear Posture in Japan and Okinawa

Gregory Kulacki with a comment by Steve Rabson



Japan’s Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera and Foreign Minister Taro Kono shake hands with U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary James Mattis before sitting down for U.S.-Japan security talks.

Japanese translation by Inoue Toshio is [available](#).

Donald Trump’s plan for a more muscular US nuclear posture got a ringing endorsement from the increasingly right-wing government of Japan. Not long after the Trump administration released its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) in early February, Foreign Minister Taro Kono said he “[highly appreciates](#)” the new approach to US nuclear weapons policy, including the emphasis on low-yield nuclear options the United States and Japan can rely on to respond to non-nuclear threats.

Kono’s endorsement of Trump’s NPR was a [surprise](#) to those who saw him as a [moderate](#) who could temper Prime Minister Abe’s geopolitical ambitions, which include amending Japan’s [pacifist constitution](#) to allow for an expansion of the size and role of Japan’s military forces.

Support within the conservative leadership of Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) for an increased US emphasis on the role of nuclear weapons is not new. Nine years ago, foreign ministry officials loyal to the LDP testified to a [US congressional commission](#) advising the Obama administration on US nuclear weapons policy. Their testimony reads like a blueprint for some of [the most controversial sections](#) of Trump’s NPR—especially its emphasis on low-yield nuclear weapons, which used to be called tactical nuclear weapons because they were options for fighting limited nuclear wars against nuclear and non-nuclear states, rather than strategically deterring the use of nuclear weapons by others.

Prime Minister Abe recently promoted one of the officials who testified to the commission in 2009, Takeo Akiba, to the top bureaucratic post in Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mr. Akiba and the rest of the LDP’s nuclear hawks may have had to wait a long time to get what they wanted, but their view of the role of US nuclear weapons in Asia is about to become official US government policy.

Then and Now

UCS obtained a copy of a statement Mr. Akiba submitted to the congressional commission on 25 February 2009, along with hand-written notes—taken by commission staff—of responses to questions. That statement, titled “Japan’s Perspective on the U.S.’s Extended Deterrence,” makes two primary requests:

- A US presidential statement that places “nuclear deterrence as the core of Japan – US security arrangements.”
- The maintenance of US nuclear weapons capabilities that are: “(a) flexible, (b) credible, (c) prompt, (d) discriminating and selective, (e) stealthy/demonstrable, and (f) sufficient to dissuade others from expanding or modernizing their nuclear capabilities.”

Obama’s 2010 NPR undoubtedly disappointed the Japanese officials who submitted that statement. Obama emphasized the declining role of US nuclear weapons in regional security:

When the Cold War ended, the United States withdrew its forward deployed nuclear weapons from the Pacific region, including removing nuclear weapons from naval surface vessels and general-purpose submarines. Since then, it has relied on its central strategic forces and the capacity to redeploy nuclear systems in East Asia in times of crisis.

Although nuclear weapons have proved to be a key component of U.S. assurances to allies and partners, the United States has relied increasingly on non-nuclear elements to strengthen regional security architectures, including a forward U.S. conventional presence and effective theater ballistic missile defenses. As the role of nuclear weapons is reduced in U.S. national security strategy, these non-nuclear elements will take on a greater share of the deterrence burden.

President Trump’s NPR discusses the future role of US nuclear options in Asia in a way that

is much more in line with the preferences in the statement Mr. Akiba submitted to the congressional commission in 2009. Trump’s NPR states:

Expanding flexible U.S. nuclear options now, to include low-yield options, is important for the preservation of credible deterrence against regional aggression... In the 2010 NPR, the United States announced the retirement of its previous nuclear-armed SLCM [sea-launched cruise missile], which for decades had contributed to deterrence and the assurance of allies, particularly in Asia. We will immediately begin efforts to restore this capability...

Mr. Akiba’s testimony to the US congressional commission suggested a preference for retaining the SLCM President Obama retired, since it “provides the flexibility of options (namely, it is low-yield, sea-based (stealthy), stand-off (survivable) and can loiter).” That SLCM was the nuclear Tomahawk Land-Attack Missile, TLAM/N.

These types of “flexible” nuclear options figure prominently in Trump’s NPR. The Japanese statement defined nuclear flexibility as having weapons that “could hold a wide variety of adversary threats at risk.” These threats included “deep and hardened underground facilities, movable targets, cyber attack, anti-satellite attack and anti-access/area denial capabilities.” In this case, the Japanese statement’s use of “anti-access/area denial” was a reference to **China’s conventional military capabilities**.

The Trump NPR gives Japan’s nuclear hawks all the “flexibility” they asked for in 2009, backed up by an unambiguous declaration that the United States will use nuclear weapons to respond to non-nuclear attacks, including “new forms of aggression” like **cyber attacks**. It also appears to endorse a strategy of **offsetting** China’s conventional military capabilities, including space and cyber capabilities, with new US nuclear weapons. The

Trump administration's [intention to use nuclear weapons](#) to counter non-nuclear Chinese military capabilities is repeated in the administration's [National Defense Strategy](#).

Making Okinawa Nuclear Again?

The handwritten notes on the 2009 Japanese statement indicate one of the commission co-chairs, former US Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, asked if Japan could adjust its domestic policies to prepare for the redeployment of US nuclear weapons in Okinawa. Mr. Akiba responded by warning Schlesinger there was still strong domestic support for Japan's [Three Non-Nuclear Principles](#), which were first announced in 1967, and subsequently [reaffirmed](#) by various members of the Japanese government as well as a 1971 vote in the Japanese Diet. The principles [declare](#) that Japan would not possess, manufacture, or allow the introduction of nuclear weapons into Japan.

But despite these concerns about Japanese public opinion, Akiba told Schlesinger that preparing to return US nuclear weapons to the Japanese island of Okinawa "sounds persuasive to me." Given the Trump NPR's emphasis on new tactical nuclear weapons that can be redeployed in Asia, and the Abe government's unequivocal support for Trump's NPR, it is worth investigating the possibility both sides have agreed to upgrade US munitions storage facilities in Okinawa so they can store US nuclear weapons on the island.

There are several reasons why redeploying nuclear weapons in Okinawa may make sense to bureaucrats, like Mr. Akiba, who support an increased role for US nuclear weapons in Asia.

The first is the existence of a secret agreement between Japan and the United States that allows the US military to redeploy US nuclear weapons in Okinawa. The agreement

was [signed by US President Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Sato](#) in 1969 as part of the legal process that returned sovereign control of the island to the government of Japan. The United States had occupied Okinawa since the end of WWII and built an expansive set of US military bases that remain there today. Some of those bases housed US nuclear weapons, which were removed in 1972 at the request of the Japanese government.

The agreement was kept secret for decades and both sides still refuse to discuss it publicly. Many of [the details](#) were finally made public in [an official investigation](#) conducted by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs during a brief period when the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) controlled the government from September 2009 to December 2012.

Another reason for redeploying US nuclear weapons in Okinawa that might sound persuasive to Mr Akiba is that US and Japanese officials can use ambiguities in the language of the Nixon-Sato agreement, and tight controls on the dissemination of information about [related bilateral discussions](#), to obscure the process that would be followed if the United States decided to make Okinawa nuclear again.

Schlesinger's question and the Japanese answer suggest the United States would ask the Japanese government for permission. But that permission need not be explicit, or public. It may not even be necessary. The language of the Nixon-Sato agreement is intentionally vague and suggests simple notification at a relatively low level of the bureaucracy might be enough. This kind of low level agreement would give the prime minister and other LDP officials the same kind of [plausible deniability](#) they used to avoid discussing the Sato-Nixon agreement on redeploying nuclear weapons in Okinawa for more than 50 years.

The potential presence of US nuclear weapons in Okinawa would be further obscured from

public view by the US government's non-confirm, non-deny policy on military deployments. US silence on the question would make it a lot easier for the Japanese government to consent to redeployment. In the absence of an external inquiry, US nuclear weapons could be put back in Okinawa quietly, without public knowledge or debate.

The final reason Okinawa might sound persuasive to Mr. Akiba is that the United States is building a new military base in the Okinawan village of [Henoko](#). The project includes significant upgrades to a munitions storage depot, adjacent to the new base, where US nuclear weapons were stored in the past. Henoko is specifically mentioned in the 1969 Nixon-Sato agreement as a mutually acceptable location for the possible redeployment of US nuclear weapons in Japan.

Birds of a Feather

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is one of Donald Trump's most [loyal](#) international supporters. He was the first world leader to [visit Trump Tower](#) during the transition and he [highlighted](#) his close personal friendship with the US president during recent Japanese elections.

Mr. Akiba is Abe's chief foreign policy advisor, especially on the question of extended nuclear deterrence. Akiba selected, organized and led the first several Japanese delegations to the US-Japan Extended Deterrence Dialogue ([EDD](#)) and has toured US nuclear weapons facilities. With the release of the new US nuclear posture review and the Abe government's unapologetic endorsement, it seems clear that all three men agree on the need to increase the role of US nuclear weapons in Asia.

The LDP support for the Trump NPR may seem surprising to many members of Congress, whose last impression of Prime Minister Abe's

opinions on nuclear weapons is the image of him greeting President Obama in Hiroshima. At a recent meeting in Washington an exceptionally well-informed national security staffer of a veteran member of the House, when informed of Foreign Minister Kono's statement of support for Trump's NPR, asked if Abe had publicly corrected Kono's misstatement.

US opponents of Trump's NPR should take note. As the debate over the NPR unfolds in the coming days, weeks and months, the LDP officials voicing their support for Trump's NPR [do not represent the majority](#) of the Japanese public and their elected representatives, who are opposed to a larger role for US nuclear weapons in the defense of Japan. But they do represent the views of Prime Minister Abe, who has lined up firmly behind the Trump NPR.

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Japanese Government Officials Call on U.S. to Maintain Its "Nuclear Umbrella" and Bring Back Nuclear Weapons to Okinawa

Commentary by Steve Rabson

In his February 15, 2018 article, Gregory Kulacki, China Project Manager of the Union of Concerned Scientists, reports that a high official in Japan's Foreign Ministry testified before a U.S. Congressional committee in 2009 in favor of bringing back nuclear weapons to Okinawa. As recorded in a Congressional memo, Akiba Takeo stated that preparing for the return of nuclear weapons to Okinawa "sounds persuasive to me." In September 2015,

Akiba was promoted to Deputy Foreign Minister, the top administrative post in the Foreign Ministry. At a news conference in Tokyo on April 25, 2018 Kulacki criticized Japan's continued reliance on the U.S. "nuclear umbrella" as a major barrier to any effort to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world. In efforts by the Union of Concerned Scientists to promote a dialogue between the United States and China to foster nuclear arms control, he said, "Japan is the single biggest obstacle to my job."¹

Central to the discussion is the possible role of Okinawa as a site for U.S. nuclear weapons, a possibility closely related to plans for a new base to be built at Henoko in the face of strong Okinawan opposition. Concerning the possible return of nuclear weapons to Okinawa, Kulacki writes that the "reason Okinawa might sound persuasive to Mr. Akiba is that the United States is building a new military base in the Okinawan village of Henoko. The project includes significant upgrades to an ammunition storage depot, adjacent to the new base, where US nuclear weapons were stored in the past." Kulacki warned Okinawans that, if the new airbase is built, it could host nuclear weapons at the storage depot.² Joining a March 3, 2016 protest rally in Henoko at the site of the planned base, he urged Okinawans to continue to oppose its construction.³

From July, 1967 to June, 1968 I was stationed in Henoko as a U.S. Army draftee at the ammunition storage depot where "tactical" nuclear weapons were stored. There were nuclear surface-to-air (anti-aircraft) missiles (Nike Hercules) that were deployed on hilltops and at airfields in Okinawa; artillery rockets (Honest John and Little John); and landmines (Atomic Demolition Munitions). At that time there were also nuclear surface-to-surface missiles (Mace-B) at Kadena Airbase that could reach all of China and the Soviet Far East. At the base in Henoko, the Army's 137th Ordnance Company, included a platoon of infantry

soldiers with sentry dogs on guard 24/7. In addition, a Marine detachment at neighboring Camp Schwab conducted drills in which they surrounded the base in full battle gear. There were "no stopping" signs on the road that ran by the base, and anyone who stopped their car, even to change a flat tire, was arrested at gunpoint and held in a detention cell for search and interrogation.

In 1959 one of the Nike Hercules missiles deployed at Naha Airbase had fired accidentally killing two Army crewmen and injuring one. The warhead bounced out and rolled on the ground, but did not detonate. At the 137th we were worried about the mission of the Nike Hercules because, although it was capable of destroying a wing of Soviet aircraft, the nuclear explosion in the air would release radiation endangering Okinawans and us on the ground.

Shortly before Okinawa's reversion to Japanese administration in 1972, with all U.S. bases intact, the high security disappeared and the Army's 137th Ordnance Company became part of the Marines' Camp Schwab (Gate 2).



Camp Schwab Gate 2 in 2014 photograph

The invoices recording that the Japanese

government paid for the removal of nuclear weapons from Okinawa are the first and only time the U.S. government has acknowledged their presence.⁴ Since they were removed, the Marines have used the base to store conventional (non-nuclear) ammunition. However, the nuclear weapons storage area remains intact to this day with close-cropped grass and sod-covered concrete storage igloos with steel doors.



Storage area with fortified underground igloos that contained nuclear weapons before reversion (2014 photograph)



High fence surrounding storage area (2014 photograph)

Meanwhile, after-effects of the base persist. Three Army veterans of the 137th from the

1960s have filed compensation claims with the U.S. government for contracting forms of cancer linked to radiation exposure. One lost an eye to melanoma. Another died in 2016, a few weeks before his claim hearing was scheduled. In addition, there remains the troubling possibility for both Americans and Okinawans that serious environmental hazards remain at this former nuclear weapons storage depot in Henoko. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Over 1,000 . . . locations, including both operational and abandoned sites, are contaminated with radiation. These sites range in size from small corners in laboratories to massive nuclear weapons facilities. The contamination may be found in the air, water, and soil, as well as equipment in buildings.”⁵

In late 1991 President George H. W. Bush ordered all tactical nuclear weapons removed from bases outside the U.S.⁶ Now, in a reversal of long-standing policy, the Trump administration plans to equip “low-yield” (previously called “tactical”) nuclear warheads on sea-launched missiles. Jon Wolfsthal, special assistant to President Obama on arms control and nonproliferation, describes this change as “totally unnecessary.” And he calls putting a low-yield nuclear weapon on ballistic missile submarines “pretty dumb” because firing it would give away the submarine’s position.⁷ Nuclear weapons do not “defend” Japan, but make an attack on the country much more likely in the event of war. The proposal that they be brought back to Okinawa is an idea out of “Dr. Strangelove.”

Related articles

- James D.J. Brown, [The Moment of Truth for Prime Minister Abe’s Russia Policy](#)
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[Veterans Reveal Nuclear Weapons Close Call Dodged in Okinawa](#)

- Steve Rabson, [Okinawa's Henoko was a "storage location" for nuclear weapons: published accounts](#)

Gregory Kulacki is China Project Manager and Senior Analyst at the Union of Concerned Scientists. He writes writing on the People's Republic of China focuses on cross-cultural communication between the United States and China.

Steve Rabson is Professor Emeritus of East Asian Studies, Brown University. His books are [Okinawa: Two Postwar Novellas](#) (Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1989, reprinted 1996), [Righteous Cause or Tragic Folly: Changing Views of War in Modern Japanese Poetry](#) (Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1998), [Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa](#), co-edited with Michael Molasky (University of Hawaii Press, 2000), [The Okinawan Diaspora in Japan: Crossing the Borders Within](#) (University of Hawaii Press, 2012), [Islands of Resistance: Japanese Literature from Okinawa](#), co-edited with Davinder Bhowmik (University of Hawaii Press, 2016); and translator of [Okinawa's GI Brides: Their Lives in America](#) by Etsuko Takushi Crissey (University of Hawaii Press, 2017). He was stationed in Okinawa as a U.S. Army draftee in the 137th Ordnance Company, Henoko in 1967-68, and is an Asia-Pacific Journal contributing editor.

Notes

¹ Naotaka Fujita, "[U.S. analyst: Japan's nuke stance obstructs arms control](#)," *The Asahi Shimbun*, April 26, 2018.

² Yukiyo Zaha, "[Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Akiba denies making his 2009 statement](#)" *Ryukyu Shimpo*, March 6, 2018.

³ "[American scientist visits Henoko to support protesters](#)," *Ryukyu Shimpo*, March 3, 2016.

⁴ William M. Arkin and William Burr, "[Where They Were](#)," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol 55, No. 6.

⁵ See article at EPA website: [here](#).

⁶ Stephen Young, "25 Years Ago President Changed Nuclear Policy," *Union of Concerned Scientists*, September 27, 2016.

⁷ Jonathon Freedland, "Trump is the real nuclear threat," *The Guardian*, August 11, 2017.