

[Policy Proposal]

Shape National Discussion on Strengthening Nuclear Deterrence

**With the Revision of the ‘Three Strategy Documents’ Approaching,
It’s Time to Establish National Understanding and Begin Policy Consideration**

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Summary of Proposal

Our proposal is based on the awareness that Japan has reached a point where its people should face real threats and have serious discussion on “what is essential for the country not to be attacked with nuclear weapons again,” while upholding the ideal of a “world without nuclear weapons.”

The ideal of abolishing nuclear weapons is historically and morally important and it must continue to be pursued in the future. That said, in the rapidly deteriorating security environment, we must also recognize the reality that ideals alone are insufficient to cope with. The rapid and diverse expansion of nuclear forces by China and North Korea is making the threat to Japan become more real. For its part, the United States has announced plans to develop a nuclear-capable sea-launched cruise missile-nuclear, known as SLCM-N, with limited deployment planned for 2032. Under such circumstances, Japan should deepen proactive discussion without relying on the premise that “nuclear doesn’t speak but works.”

Based on the aforementioned understanding, the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals (JINF) requests the Japanese government to address the following two points in the process of revising the Three Strategy Documents—the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy and the Defense Buildup Program—of 2022 scheduled for the end of Reiwa 8 (2026).

1. **It should be clearly stipulated in the National Security Strategy that the government shall take the lead in initiating national discussion on what is essential to prevent Japan from being attacked with nuclear weapons again.**
2. **It should be clearly stipulated in the National Security Strategy that the government shall examine the appropriate form of nuclear deterrence for Japan and take the necessary measures at the earliest possible time before 2032.**

1. Purpose

Japan is currently facing the most severe security environment since the end of World War II as China is accelerating the quantitative and qualitative modernization of its nuclear arsenal, North Korea is aiming to diversify and put into practical use its nuclear and missile capabilities and Russia is repeating nuclear intimidation against Ukraine. Tensions over nuclear issues are simultaneously rising in the Middle East in addition to the United States, China, Russia and North Korea. Against this background, Japan is also being forced to re-examine the reliability of its reliance on extended deterrence by the United States.

On the other hand, the advocacy for the abolition of nuclear weapons is an ideal that should be pursued by Japan as a country that suffered atomic bombings, and Japan needs to continue to strive for the realization of a “world without nuclear weapons” in the future. However, until that ideal becomes a reality, we cannot turn away from another question, namely, “What kind of deterrence and policy preparations should Japan build to ensure that it never again suffers a nuclear attack?” Security policies that face the ideal of nuclear abolition and the reality of the existence of nuclear weapons are not inherently mutually exclusive. Rather, it will be impossible to fulfill the national responsibility of “never allowing a nuclear attack again” without facing the real threats and understanding the actual state of deterrence.

Nonetheless, in Japan’s domestic politics and its media space, strategic discussion regarding nuclear issues is still considered taboo, leaving the country trapped in emotional arguments and dichotomy. A public opinion poll conducted by the Jiji Press news agency from January 9 to 12, 2026, showed that 62.6% of respondents were “against” Japan possessing nuclear weapons, while only 16.0% were in favor.¹ The atmosphere of avoiding “discussion [on nuclear issues] itself as a dangerous thing” still persists strongly within Japan. As we perceive this “absence of discussion” situation as a structural problem, we propose creating a space where Japan should correctly recognize the reality of the nuclear threats as an independent country and its people can engage in calm and rational discussion on the fundamental issue of how much of its national security should be entrusted to the Alliance and from what point should the country bear responsibility.

2. Why Now?

2-1. Lack of Discussion Since the Formulation of the National Security Strategy of 2022

The security environment surrounding Japan is far more unstable than when the National Security Strategy of 2022 was formulated. This strategy clearly mentioned that China was “extensively and rapidly enhancing its military power without sufficient transparency,” that North Korea had an intention “to bolster its nuclear capability both in quality and in quantity at a maximum speed” and that Russia “continues to repeat words and actions that could be interpreted as threats to use of nuclear weapons.” However, there is no evidence that public discussion on nuclear deterrence has been held in Japan since 2022.

2-2. Uncertainty over the Credibility of the Alliance

The idea of seeing the credibility of an alliance as a given is beginning to waver. U.S. President Donald Trump said in an interview with a British newspaper on April 1, 2026, that he was seriously considering pulling the United States out of NATO, which he described as a “paper tiger.”² On the other hand, the White House issued a Fact Sheet immediately after a Japan-U.S. summit held on March 19, 2026, reporting that the Japanese and U.S. leaders affirmed their commitment—building on the successful 2025 deployment of the U.S. Typhon missile system to mainland Japan—to deploying advanced defense capabilities in Japan; increasing by fourfold the production of Standard Missile 3 Block IIA interceptors in Japan; and strengthening deterrence and defense cooperation by enhancing bilateral information sharing, among others, through the development of a sovereign cloud platform for government data.³ In other words, the involvement of the United States is neither automatic nor unconditional, and it must be recognized that there will come a day when the Alliance ceases to function unless both political will and institutional implementation are continuously confirmed.

2-3. Developments in China and North Korea and the ‘2032 Issue’

Military developments in China and North Korea are forcing Japan to begin discussion on the nuclear issues. A U.S. Department of Defense report for 2024 pointed out that China’s nuclear arsenal was likely to increase to more than 1,000 warheads by 2030 with expansion at a similar pace projected to continue into 2035. An increase of approximately 100 warheads in one year can be described as an abnormally rapid nuclear armament buildup. The U.S. report raised the possibility that China was also pursuing nuclear weapons of explosive yields of less than 10 kilotons, smaller than the 15-kiloton atomic bomb dropped on the city of Hiroshima. It noted that China saw low-yield nuclear weapons most suitable for use on the DF-26 intermediate range ballistic missile, capable of conducting nuclear and conventional strikes, and the H-6N bombers capable of carrying air-launched ballistic missiles.⁴ Moreover, the 2023 edition of the DOD report said that one possible scene for the use of those low-yield nuclear weapons would be a situation where China’s defeat in a conventional war over Taiwan would seriously threaten the survival of the Chinese Communist Party regime.⁵

In May 2025, North Korea conducted what it called “a long-range artillery joint striking drill of long-range artillery and missile systems of sub-units of the Korean People’s Army, providing both trainings and lectures to make all the relevant troops master the procedure and processes for rapidly switching over to the nuclear counterattack posture.”⁶ On March 15 this year, “a long-range artillery sub-unit of the KPA in the western area” staged “a firepower strike drill.” North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was present in both drills, emphasizing the importance for his country of tactical nuclear weapons’ destructive power. North Korea is thus ramping up its training proficiency with the actual use of nuclear weapons in mind.⁷

Furthermore, modern warfare can no longer be comprehended solely through conventional forces as it is being waged under the “nuclear shadow.” In its war of invasion in Ukraine, Russia has been staging a conventional offensive, while repeatedly intimidating the Ukrainians in the background by suggesting the possibility of using nuclear weapons. In the autumn of 2022, there was talk about the possibility of Russia attacking Ukraine with a low-yield nuclear weapon.⁸ What the war in Ukraine shows is the reality that we have entered an era in which we must fight prolonged conventional wars under the threat of nuclear strikes. Reflecting such a perception of threats, French President Emmanuel Macron openly announced in March 2026 that France would expand its nuclear arsenal as a way of strengthening Europe’s nuclear deterrence.⁹

As for the United States’ nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) program, it was cancelled in the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) but later reinstated as a major defense program with budgetary allocations to enable limited operational deployment not later than September 2032 and the achievement of initial operational capability by 2034. Given that the SLCM-N is being developed for the purpose of supplementing the United States’ theater deterrence capabilities mainly in the Indo-Pacific region, it is conceivable that dual-use (nuclear and non-nuclear) U.S. naval vessels equipped with it might call at ports in Japan.¹⁰ Considering this, it goes without saying that Japan needs to present its public with options for strengthening the country’s nuclear deterrence, including the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, at an early stage prior to 2032, while proceeding policy coordination with the United States.

Nuclear weapons are no longer something that should be discussed as a dichotomous matter that is “to be used or not to be used.” They are now a fundamental prerequisite for conventional warfare.

Under such circumstances, it is a serious problem that Japan alone continues to turn a blind eye to this reality and that the discussion on nuclear issues has still not been sufficiently established. Japan’s historical experience as an atomic-bombed nation is its most important point in the discussion on nuclear issues. However, that position and the discussion on nuclear deterrence and extended deterrence as a security policy have been juxtaposed without proper clarification. Accordingly, the atmosphere of avoiding “discussion [on nuclear issues] itself as a dangerous thing” has continued to dominate the political, media and public opinion spheres. This reality, therefore, has prevented the emergence of the attitude of “deepening discussion while gaining public understanding.”

3. Shaping National Discussion to Facilitate National Understanding of the Necessity of Strengthening Nuclear Deterrence

3-1. Institutionalizing 'Security Brief' Disclosure

What is necessary for shaping national discussion is not a one-time effort to raise the relevant issues, but the institutionalization of continuous information disclosure. Specifically, the government or quasi-governmental entities, or private-sector think tanks should regularly publish, for example, a "security brief" that provides a clearly organized, easy-to-understand summary of the latest nuclear and missile-related developments in China, North Korea and Russia, the arms control environment, the progress of Japan-U.S. deterrence consultations and the state of the development of the civil protection system, among others. Needless to say, the Ministry of Defense's annual "Defense of Japan" white paper and comprehensive announcements it publishes for each major incident and event are important. Yet, it should be pointed out that they are far from sufficient in terms of frequency, comprehensiveness and thoroughness of explanation to convey the causal relationship between the sense of crisis and policy to the public.

3-2. Japan Ought to Provide an Answer to the Question of the United States' 'Credibility' as Its Own Issue.

When it comes to extended deterrence, there is an inherent gap between the credibility for deterring the adversaries and that for reassuring allied countries. As Healey's Theorem shows, it is said to take only 5% credibility of American retaliation to deter an adversary, but 95% to reassure U.S. allies.^{11 12}

Therefore, it is not enough for Japan to simply ask abstractly, "Will the United States protect us?" Rather, Japan itself should independently define "what would make Japan feel secure." To do so, it is necessary to begin, through the shaping of national discussion, looking into what kind of deterrent our country should have for that purpose. For instance, we should discuss, without placing any premises and eliminate taboos, the following themes: 1) strengthening the function of extended deterrence under the Japan-U.S. alliance; 2) reviewing the Three Non-Nuclear Principles; 3) proposing nuclear sharing with the United States; and 4) possessing Japan's own nuclear weapons (based on Article 10, Paragraph 1 of the Treaty of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons).¹³

4. What the Government's Year-end Revision of the Three Security Documents Should Address

It is by no means contradictory for Japan, a country that suffered atomic bombings, to continue advocating the ideal of abolishing nuclear weapons on the one hand and to establish realistic deterrents to ensure that it is never again subjected to a nuclear attack. Rather, the government is responsible for implementing specific policies to protect the Japanese people in the face of the dangerous reality that will persist until that ideal is achieved.

Therefore, when the government revises the existing National Security Strategy at the end of this year as planned, it should explicitly pledge not only its institutional and continuous efforts to initiate national discussion on strengthening nuclear deterrence but also its policy commitment to studying and considering options for enhancing nuclear deterrence for Japan at the earliest possible time before 2032. Once again, we strongly urge the government to institutionalize national discussion and embark on considering the strengthening of nuclear deterrence.

Bibliography

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- ⁴ 2025 Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China
- ⁵ Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024
- ⁶ (Japanese site)
<http://www.kcna.kp/jp/article/q/0bf90f4d74cc557f997fc1289b9d8e55.kcmsf>
- ⁷ (Japanese site)
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- ⁸ <https://www.cnb.com/2024/09/07/cia-director-russia-ukraine-war-nuclear-weapon-risk.html>
- ⁹ Reuters, “France to boost nuclear arsenal, involve European allies in deterrence,” March 2, 2026.
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French President Emmanuel Macron announced in March 2026 that France would increase its nuclear arsenal.

¹⁰ Congressional Research Service, “Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N),” IF12084, version 14.

URL: https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF12084/IF12084.14.pdf
Under Section 1633 of the FY2026 NDAA (National Defense Authorization Act), limited operational deployment is required until September 2032, and under Section 1640 of the FY2024 NDAA, achievement of IOC (initial operational capability) is required by September 30, 2034. It should be noted that the “2,000–2,500 km” range mentioned in the text is more appropriately understood as including the reference range of the older TLAM-N (nuclear-capable Tomahawk), cited in the CRS document, rather than as the publicly confirmed performance of the SLCM-N itself.

¹¹ Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1989), p. 243.

¹² <https://www.csis.org/analysis/europe-needs-more-conventional-forces-not-its-own-nukes>

¹³ The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Article X

1. Each Party shall in exercising its national sovereignty have the right to withdraw from the Treaty if it decides that extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country. It shall give notice of such withdrawal to all other Parties to the Treaty and to the United Nations Security Council three months in advance. Such notice shall include a statement of the extraordinary events it regards as having jeopardized its supreme interests.

Supplemental Material

| <i>Point of discussion</i> | The National Security Strategy 2022 (relevant sentences) |
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| <i>The meaning of the Three Non-Nuclear Principles</i> | “As a peace-loving nation, Japan will adhere to the basic policy of maintaining an exclusively national defense-oriented policy, not becoming a military power that poses a threat to other countries, and observing the Three Non-Nuclear Principles.” |
| <i>The basic understanding of the Japan-U.S. Alliance and the U.S. extended deterrence</i> | “The Japan-U.S. Alliance, including the provision of extended deterrence, will remain the cornerstone of Japan's national security policy. ...Japan will further strengthen the deterrence and response capabilities of the Japan-U.S. Alliance, including extended deterrence by the U.S. that is backed by its full range of capabilities, including nuclear.” |
| <i>Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation</i> | “...Japan, as the only country to have ever suffered atomic bombings in war, will spearhead international efforts in realizing a ‘world without nuclear weapons.’ ...will maintain and strengthen the international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime, with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) at its cornerstone...” |