Agenda for Japan–US Strategic Consultations [1]

Yukio Satoh

Torn between heightened expectations for the progress of nuclear disarmament and increased concerns about North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile development and also the expansion of China's military power, Japan is at a loss in prioritizing policy options, particularly in such areas that require a well-considered balance between the goal of global nuclear disarmament and the requirements for national security, particularly nuclear deterrence.

This is the consequence of a lopsided approach towards the issues related to nuclear weapons in which the body politic of Japan has been indulging ever since the time of the Cold War. Reflecting a strong anti-nuclear weapon sentiment prevailing among the people, Japanese policy has tilted towards the advocacy of global nuclear disarmament, having done for deterrence little more than accepting the US "nuclear umbrella", which was widely regarded, if not by the government, almost as a necessary evil at best.

The Three Non-Nuclear Principles of "not possessing nuclear weapons, not producing them and not permitting their entry into the country", first formalized by Prime Minister Eisaku Sato in the late 1960s, came to be regarded as a prime national policy since it was given parliamentary authorization in 1971 in the form of resolutions adopted by both Houses of the Diet (Japanese Parliament).

While relying on the US extended nuclear deterrent, the Japanese government has long been reluctant to become involved in US nuclear strategy. The first National Defense Program Outlines (NDPO) adopted by the cabinet in 1976 simply stated: "Against nuclear threats, Japan will rely on the nuclear deterrent capability of the United States." However, it did not explain how to ensure the extended deterrence. Nor has Tokyo ever sought consultations with Washington on the function of US deterrence strategy. Unlike European forces in NATO, Japan's Self Defense Forces (SDF) have been detached from US nuclear strategy, let alone from any nuclear

[1] This article is adapted from the presentation the author made at the International Symposium on Security Affairs,"Major Powers' Nuclear Policies and International Order in the 21st Century", organized by the National Institute for Defense Studies in Tokyo on November 18, 2009. The article represents the author's personal views.

related operations.

The Japanese government had gone even further in pledging to strictly apply the Non-Nuclear Principles to the entry of US vessels and aircraft carrying nuclear weapons at a time when non-strategic nuclear weapons were reportedly aboard some of them. It then claimed that US vessels carrying nuclear weapons had never entered Japanese ports since the "prior consultations" by the US, which were required in advance of such move, had never taken place. It is now known, however, that the Japanese government persisted with the claim in spite of the confidential reminders by the US government that Washington did not regard such operational moves as entry to Japanese ports and passage through its territorial waters by vessels carrying nuclear weapons as a subject for the obligatory prior consultations.

US vessels and aircraft no longer carry non-strategic nuclear weapons. Their withdrawal was announced by President George Bush in 1991. Yet the Japanese government led by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) had kept repeating the Cold War-time pledge until it was replaced by the new coalition government led by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) last September. The new government divulged a discrepancy between the previous government's claim and the US position on the issue, together with certain confidential commitments the LDP government had made to Washington in order to accommodate US operational requirements in contingencies. At the same time, the DPJ-led government asserted that Japan would be able to maintain the Three Non-Nuclear Principles without causing problems to US naval operations so long as non-strategic nuclear weapons are not aboard the vessels.

Japanese security perceptions have changed since the end of the Cold War in favor of closer alliance with the US, particularly after Pyongyang shot a Taepodong missile over Japan in 1998 and the abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korean agents became public knowledge in 2002. The continued expansion of China's military power was also becoming a cause of Japanese concern in the course of the 1990s despite the increasing economic interdependence between the two countries. Moreover, exposed to growing threats from North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile development, Japanese opinion leaders and pundits have become increasingly anxious about whether the American commitment to extend nuclear deterrence is credible.

Yet an anti-nuclear weapon sentiment still prevails over strategic considerations among Japanese political and public opinion. The Japanese people look at issues

related to nuclear weapons primarily from the viewpoint of the victims of nuclear explosions and regard it important to ensure that the world will not forget the atrocious consequences of the nuclear explosions their countrymen suffered. They are, therefore, far more interested in nuclear disarmament than deterrence.

The public's sentiment has been reflected in defense policy. For example, the current National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG)[2] adopted in 2004, while reaffirming the long-held policy of relying on the US nuclear deterrent for security, stressed the government's intention to play an active role "in creating a world free of nuclear weapons" and also "in international disarmament and non-proliferation efforts regarding other types of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems". The earlier and the first post-Cold War National Defense Program Outlines (NDPO) adopted in 1995, too, balanced the statement of reliance on the US extended nuclear deterrent with an emphasis on efforts toward nuclear disarmament. Neither of them addressed the fundamental issue of how to ensure the function of US extended deterrence for the security of Japan, following the stance of the first and Cold War-time NDPO referred to earlier.

The Three Non-Nuclear Principles remain almost sacrosanct. Although North Korea's nuclear tests aroused calls for the revision of the Non-Nuclear Principles, such voices were a distinct minority, and most of them proposed allowing the entry into Japanese territorial waters and ports of US vessels carrying nuclear weapons for the purpose of enhancing the credibility of the US extended nuclear deterrent.

More recently, increasing calls for "a world without nuclear weapons", most symbolically President Barack Obama's speech at Prague, gave rise to high expectations for the progress of nuclear disarmament. Many Japanese were moved by President Obama's words: "As the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act." However, they, perhaps wishfully, paid little attention to the President's realistic prediction in the speech; "the goal (of realizing a world free from nuclear weapons) will not be reached quickly —perhaps not in my lifetime."

The change of government in Tokyo last September, from the coalition led by the LDP to one led by the DPJ has tilted the balance between the two policy goals of nuclear disarmament and deterrence further in favor of the former. Qualifying it

---

[2] The English translation of the policy document's title, BOEI-KEIKAKU-TAIKO, was changed from National Defense Program Outlines to National Defense Program Guidelines when the last one was adopted in 2004

as his personal opinion, Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada quickly floated a proposal that the United States and other nuclear weapon states adopt a policy of "no first use" of nuclear weapons. He later proposed limiting the purpose of retaining nuclear weapons solely to deterring nuclear threats in his letters of last December to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and also in the Joint Statement in February this year with his Australian counterpart, Stephen Smith. Both are fair proposals worth considering for the sake of nuclear disarmament. But, their implications for the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence need to be examined carefully for the reasons to be described later.

With far more serious implications for Japan's security, the new government led by Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama of the DPJ has delivered an unprecedented jolt to the alliance relations with Washington by ceasing (with little consideration to many pronounced opinions against his policy option) the refueling operations by the SDF in the Indian Ocean for other navies' vessels engaged in a fight against terrorism, and, most damagingly, by trying to undo the already agreed plan to relocate the Marine air station from Futenma, Okinawa, to the northern part of the island. The plan was the central part of the two governments' efforts since 1996 designed to reduce burdens on local communities in Okinawa, where 74% of the space used by US forces in Japan is concentrated. The plan is also an integral part of the US plan to globally restructure its force posture in order to meet new challenges such as terrorism.

Need for a New Approach

Although the alliance relations remain unsettled as of this writing primarily over the relocation issue, it is long overdue for the Japanese government to take a new approach toward questions concerning nuclear weapons by pursuing the two policy goals of global nuclear disarmament and national security in a more balanced manner.

US extended nuclear deterrence is no doubt the key for both policy goals. The security assurances it provides to Japan are essential for the country's primary contribution to the cause of global nuclear disarmament, that is, Japan's firm commitment to the Three Non-Nuclear Principles in spite of its capability to do otherwise. The Three Non-Nuclear Principles are not the consequence of US extended nuclear deterrence. Nevertheless, it is evident that the latter has been

making the former feasible since the time of the Cold War and also in the face of North Korea's nuclear weapons development.

Accordingly, the first step that should be taken in this new approach is for the Japanese government to recognize more openly than ever the nexus between the two goals: that US extended deterrence is essential for Japan's commitment to and efforts for global nuclear disarmament.

If the credibility of the US commitment is the question at issue, it is Japanese perceptions that matter. The US commitment to provide extended deterrence to Japan has been repeatedly affirmed by presidents, including President Obama, and other senior officials as well as in agreed documents. Nevertheless, Japanese misgivings and doubts about American commitment persist.

Japan's long aloofness from US nuclear strategy (for fear of involvement) resulted in the lack of the country's capacity to digest US nuclear commitment in its full context. Consequently, debates in Japan about the credibility of US extended deterrence remain at the level of whether to trust the US or not. Even the fact that the US force presence in Japan is making attacks on Japan tantamount to those on the US itself has been scarcely focused in debates on the credibility of US commitment.

To enhance the credibility of US extended deterrence in these circumstances, it is important for Tokyo to be officially engaged in consultations with Washington on deterrence strategy, including nuclear deterrence. Without such consultations, the Japanese government, let alone the public, will have to be speculative about the credibility of US commitment. That US strategic thinking is undergoing epoch-making changes makes such consultations more important than ever.

Equally essential for the sake of enhanced credibility of US extended deterrence is, of course, for Japan to strengthen its defense cooperation with the United States in order to facilitate the function of US extended deterrence; a point to be discussed later.

A sign of progress is already seen, albeit belatedly, with regard to Japan–US strategic consultations. Japanese and US officials have reportedly begun since last year to explore the way to organize official consultations on extended deterrence. How the new DPJ government under Prime Minister Hatoyama wishes to proceed with these particular discussions remains to be seen. However, Japan–US strategic consultations on extended deterrence will have to be an important part of the efforts the Hatoyama government has committed to make for its pledged purpose of "deepening" alliance relations.

Diminishing Role of Nuclear Weapons

It is premature to determine whether it would be possible or even desirable to seek to enhance the density and confidentiality of Japan–US consultations to the level of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group, which requires an agreement for secrecy protection according to US law. However, there are a broad range of issues that Tokyo and Washington can and should discuss below that level, including the diminishing role of nuclear weapons in US deterrence strategy, the declaratory policy of nuclear strategy, Japan–US defense cooperation for common deterrence purposes and strategic relationships with China and Russia.

As made clear in the new Nuclear Posture Review Report (NPRR) under President Obama, the United States will continue to move in the direction of diminishing the role of nuclear weapons in the overall deterrence strategy. Indeed, the US and Japanese governments already shared a common recognition that US military power for deterrence purposes should comprise both nuclear and non-nuclear forces; that is to say, the US extended deterrent should not be limited to the so-called "nuclear umbrella". In the Joint Statement issued in May, 2007, at the end of the US–Japan Security Consultative Committee attended by the US Secretaries of State and Defense and the Japanese Foreign and Defense Ministers, the US reaffirmed the position that "the full range of US military capabilities — both nuclear and non-nuclear strike forces and defensive capabilities — form the core of extended deterrence."

Yet, for the sake of Japanese confidence in US extended deterrence, it is important to make it known to the Japanese public that the effectiveness of American deterrence will remain little changed even as Washington diminishes the role of nuclear weapons in its deterrence strategy. One could even argue that advanced conventional weapons would help increase the effect of deterrence, because they would be usable with far less hesitation than the case of nuclear weapons and their proven destructive power and precision will be further improved. But, this has not become public knowledge yet.

On the other hand, faced with Russian and Chinese nuclear forces and North Korea's nuclear weapons development, Japan needs to see that nuclear weapons will remain part of the US deterrent. In this context, what President Barack Obama stated in Tokyo last November was most reassuring: "So long as these (nuclear) weapons exist, the United States will maintain a strong and effective nuclear deterrent that

guarantees the defense of our allies — including South Korea and Japan."

This leads to another important subject for strategic consultations between Tokyo and Washington; that is, how to make Japan's Three Non-Nuclear Principles compatible with the US policy to "neither confirm nor deny" the whereabouts of nuclear weapons. The issue remains hypothetical as long as the US keeps non-strategic nuclear weapons away from its vessels and aircraft. Although, as noted earlier, some argue in Japan for revising the Three Non-Nuclear Principles in order to allow vessels carrying nuclear weapons to enter Japanese ports for the sake of enhanced credibility of US extended nuclear deterrent, it is questionable if the US will redeploy once withdrawn non-strategic nuclear weapons aboard vessels. For, it is likely that the US will continue to move in the direction of replacing these non-strategic nuclear weapons with advanced conventional weapons. This underscores yet again the importance for the Japanese side to discuss the matter with the US rather than speculate about it.

Declaratory Policy of Nuclear Strategy

Other important agenda item is the declaratory policy of nuclear strategy, particularly the one concerning the "first use" of nuclear weapons and another related to the purpose of nuclear weapons. They are now becoming the focus of arguments for nuclear disarmament, underscoring the nexus between nuclear disarmament and deterrence. The new NPRR has given reassuring answers to questions related to these issues. Yet, they remain to be made as a shared alliance policy.

Notwithstanding Foreign Minister Okada's advocacy of "no first use", declaration by the US of such a policy would undercut the credibility of US extended deterrence, particularly in the eyes of Japan and South Korea, which depend upon the US extended nuclear deterrent. To these countries, the United States' policy of not excluding the possibility of "first use" of nuclear weapons implies that Washington would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons even before an enemy does in the event its allies were attacked, and this provides a core basis for the credibility of US commitment. That the new NPRR remains silent on the issue of "no first use" is indeed reassuring in this context.

It must be noted here that discussions about "first use" in Japan are somewhat distorted because of the Japanese translation of the term. The widely used Japanese term for "first use" — "sensei-shiyo" — literally means "preemptive use" in Japanese,

while "first use" does not always imply "preemptive use", particularly in contrast to preemptive "first strike".

It is understandable that a notion of "preemptive use" is repugnant to many, and the Japanese are no exception. Foreign Minister Okada reportedly bases his personal advocacy of "no first use" on the conviction that "sensei-shiyo", meaning "preemptive use", is immoral. However, it would be counterproductive for the sake of the country's security if the Japanese people would become critical of the US policy of calculated ambiguity about "first use," believing that "first use" is always preemptive. It is the responsibility of the Japanese government to discuss the concept of deterrence strategy in such a way that would ensure that the public understands internationally used terms correctly. Otherwise, Japanese debates on the issue will be isolated from international discussions.

The another proposition to limit the purpose of retaining nuclear weapons solely to deterring nuclear threats is also deemed to contain a risk, although theoretical, of leaving the questions of how to deter the use of biological and chemical weapons unanswered.

It is indeed questionable whether nuclear weapons are suitable for retaliation against the use or threat of biological or chemical weapons. However, so long as no other assured means are available for the purpose of preventing the use of non-nuclear WMD, there seems to be no other option but to maintain such conditions that would compel countries suspected of possessing these WMD to fear the possibility of being punished with nuclear retaliation if they were to use any WMD.

As North Korea is suspected of possessing both biological and chemical weapons, to declare, particularly now, that the purpose of retaining nuclear weapons be limited solely to deterring nuclear threats would send the wrong message to Pyongyang. Politically, too, it would be unwise for the United States to do so now in the face of North Korea's defiant attitude toward the Six Party Talks. Accordingly, attempts to change the globally applicable declaratory policy of US nuclear strategy need to be examined with due consideration to the implications the changes would have for different regional security conditions. Stark differences between Northeast Asia and Europe must be noted in this context.

The Obama administration's NPRR responds to these questions considerately and in a balanced manner: It declares that "the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations" and that "the United

States is not prepared at the present time to adopt a universal policy that deterring nuclear attack is the sole purpose of nuclear weapons". The pronounced reservation of "the right to make any adjustment in the assurance that may be warranted by the evolution and proliferation of the biological weapons threat and US capacities to counter the threat" is also appropriate under the present circumstances.

Japan – US Defense Cooperation

In order to enhance the credibility of US extended deterrence, defense cooperation between the Japanese SDF and US forces needs to be addressed in a new light, particularly in the context of the growing role of conventional weapons in US deterrence strategy. How future changes in American strategic thinking would affect Japan–US defense cooperation and how the SDF would have to adapt its force posture to the needs for common deterrence purposes are important agenda items for Japan–US strategic consultations.

It is true that Japan has been contributing to US deterrence strategy by providing US forces with bases indispensable for US global strategy. The cost-sharing arrangements, in which the Japanese government bears a considerable portion of the costs for the US force presence in Japan (and also for the relocation of the Marines to Guam), too, contribute to the same end by offering great cost savings for Washington. But, operational cooperation between the SDF and US forces will become growingly important for common deterrence purposes as conventional forces and defense systems will come to play larger roles in US deterrence strategy.

Japan–US defense cooperation has been expanded over a long time in many areas, from intelligence and operational cooperation to standardization of weapons and equipment and logistical support. Increased cooperation at the command level, which will take place as part of the restructuring of the US force presence in and around Japan, is expected to strengthen further operational cooperation between the two forces. To improve ballistic missile defense (BMD) capabilities is a growingly important aspect of Japan–US defense cooperation in the context of deterrence strategy. Although BMD systems need to be much improved in order to make them fully reliable, they are designed to eventually function as a supplementary means of defending Japan against North Korea's missiles if and when deterrence were to fail.

But, given that terrorism is clearly the primary focus of the US strategy and

also that US military resources are being stretched thin due to a heavy concentration in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is evident that the SDF must share more responsibility for common alliance purposes. This makes it more pressing than ever for Japan to rectify long-recognized deficiencies in its defense policy. Changing the constitutional interpretation of the right of "collective self-defense" is a typical case in point.

It is now widely acknowledged that the hitherto-held constitutional interpretation, which prohibits Japan's exercise of the right of "collective self-defense," has been hampering implementation of the Japan–US Security Treaty as well as the SDF's full participation in UN peacekeeping operations. The need for change is underlined anew by American concerns about the ambiguity left in the way the SDF operates its missile defense systems to defend the interests of its ally. Whether the SDF is prepared to shoot down adversaries' missiles heading toward US territory is the question at issue.

Japan's defense budget is another serious problem to be addressed. The country's defense spending, excluding that for implementing the conclusions of the US–Japan Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO), has been decreasing for eight years in a row, and the defense budget has decreased by 6.3% in the fourteen years from its last peak of ¥4,941 billion in 1997. Notwithstanding Japan's long lasting economic and financial difficulties and the subsequent requirements for budget retrenchment, these facts clearly contradict the Japanese government's pronounced concerns about North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile development or the growth of China's military power.

Delays in implementing SACO's conclusions, particularly, those of relocating the Marine air station from Futenma to the previously agreed location in the northern part of the island and redeploying 8,000 Marines to Guam are already affecting US plans to globally restructure its force posture.

In the broader context of alliance cooperation, the shrinkage of Japan's profile as a provider of development assistance, from being the top donor during the 1990s to ranking fifth in 2009, and the continued minimalist approach toward peacekeeping and other international cooperation involving the SDF are diminishing the country's productiveness for partnership with the US and consequently marginalizing Japan's position among US allies.

It is strongly hoped that the new Japanese government led by Prime Minister Hatoyama will address these issues as part of its pledge to place Japan–US relations on a "more equal" footing, by "deepening" alliance cooperation in the

course of the year 2010, which marks the 50th anniversary of the current Japan – US Security Treaty.

South Korean Connection

Another point that needs to be stressed in the context of Japan – US defense cooperation is that the conventionally accepted assumptions about military crises affecting Japan need to be reviewed in the light of North Korea's increased military capability.

For a long time, it has been assumed that any military conflict that would affect Japan would break out either on the Korean Peninsula or across the Taiwan Strait. On such conventional assumptions, Japan's cooperation with the US under the Japan – US Security Treaty has long been recognized as indispensable for US efforts to defend South Korea and Taiwan, although Japan's expected role in the latter case has never been defined ever since Japan recognized the People's Republic of China (Beijing) as representing China under the widely accepted notion of "one China".

However, we now have to add to these worst-case scenarios the possibility that North Korea might directly attack Japan with missiles. This third possible contingency makes it more important than ever to ensure that the Japan – US security arrangements function in a seamless manner with the US-South Korea security arrangements, as such an eventuality would certainly involve US forces in South Korea and adversely affect South Korea even if the country itself were not attacked.

Moreover, North Korea's nuclear weapons development has made the enhancement of the credibility of US extended deterrence a common task for Tokyo and Seoul. This underscores the need to include both Japan and South Korea in a circle of consultations with the United States aimed at enhancing the credibility of US extended deterrence. Organizing a trilateral mechanism for strategic consultations would not be politically advisable, for it might make other countries such as China and Russia unnecessarily suspicious. Moreover, leaving aside the politically complicated relations between Japan and South Korea, the differences between the two alliance systems (Japan – US and US – South Korea) in operational arrangements, including command structures, might make a trilateral mechanism difficult to organize.

Still, it would be highly advisable for the two countries to coordinate efforts to enhance the credibility of US extended deterrence through a set of three bilateral consultations: Japan – US, US – South Korea and Japan – South Korea. It

is particularly important for Tokyo and Seoul to promote strategic dialogue, which remains inchoate.

China and Russia

Sharing common strategic perceptions with regard to China and Russia is also an important purpose of Japan–US strategic consultations. These two countries are no longer adversaries to Japan and the United States in the way the Soviet Union was during the Cold War. However, they still retain elements of uncertainty and unpredictability, particularly as seen from the viewpoint of Tokyo's and Washington's security.

China's continued increase of its military power, including its strategic forces, without transparency is a matter of growing concern in the region as well as globally. Russia's commitment to nuclear disarmament, too, will have to be measured carefully. As indicated by the new military doctrine announced by President Dmitry Medvedev last February, Moscow is growingly dependent upon nuclear weapons as it sees the decline of its conventional forces.

On the other hand, given that US and Russian nuclear forces are by far the largest in the world and also that their stockpiles are regarded as excessive for their own strategic requirements, it is indeed a precondition for the promotion of global nuclear disarmament that Washington and Moscow proceed with reductions of their nuclear stockpiles. The New START is certainly an encouraging progress, but post-New START reductions must be pursued. It is also important to engage China in global efforts for nuclear disarmament from an early stage.

How the US will be able to ensure the maintenance of the "strategic stability" with these two countries, which the new NPRR regards important, is a matter of mutual interest between Tokyo and Washington. The another point of concern from Tokyo's long-term perspective is a possibility that a combination of reduced US and Russian nuclear stockpiles and increased (or not reduced) Chinese nuclear forces might change the nuclear force balance among the three countries in such a way as to have a destabilizing impact on security conditions in the Asia-Pacific region.

Of course, a simple numerical comparison of nuclear warheads would not indicate the real state of strategic balance among the three countries, particularly given the prospect that non-strategic nuclear weapons in US deterrence strategy will be increasingly replaced with advanced conventional weapons. In the eyes of

US allies and partners in Asia, however, a changing nuclear force balance among the three countries would have significant implications for their perceptions of the credibility of US extended deterrence. It must be noted in this regard that the nuclear force balance between the US on one side and Russia and China on the other that Washington would find acceptable for the sake of strategic stability would not necessarily be reassuring particularly to Tokyo and Seoul.

Politically, too, US–Russia strategic arms reduction negotiations and US–China dialogue on strategic issues are important agenda items for Japan–US strategic consultations. Since it can hardly be expected that a non-nuclear state will get involved in nuclear talks between nuclear weapons countries, Japan needs to count on alliance cooperation from the US in order to have its interests protected in such talks. The Japan–US consultations in the 1980s in the course of US negotiations with the Soviet Union that led to the total abolition of Soviet SS-20 missiles were a rare but important precedent in this context. The SS-20 was then regarded as posing threat to both Europe and East Asia without threatening the US.

There is some concern in Japan that the country might be left out of progress in US–China strategic cooperation. Of course, Japan cannot always take American support for Japanese positions for granted, and vice versa. Washington has its own policy objectives and priorities, and so does Tokyo. Still, it should be better recognized by the Japanese that Japan is a US ally and that China is not, no matter how important China might become economically as well as strategically in American eyes. At the same time, for Washington to keep Tokyo informed of its strategic talks with Moscow and Beijing would help assure the Japanese politically of the US commitment to the alliance with their country.

In addition, here again is a prospect for interface between disarmament and deterrence, for it is likely that Russia and China will press the US to include the issue of ballistic missile defense in the agenda for strategic talks. In order to avoid complications, it is important to define the distinction between theater or regional BMD systems, such as the Japanese ones, and those with implications for strategic stability among nuclear powers, although China might argue that the Japanese systems, too, would have strategic implications for Beijing.

The Importance of Public Relations

No alliance can ever be free from mutual skepticism, particularly one between

a minor party and a major one, and the Japan–US alliance is no exception. It is also true that the question of how to increase the Japanese people's confidence in American extended deterrence had remained a marginal issue for both Tokyo and Washington until they were challenged by North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile development.

Needles to say, it is the responsibility of the Japanese government to ensure the public's support for the alliance with the US. But, US cooperation is essential to the end. It is therefore important for Tokyo and Washington to have a coherent policy aimed at enhancing the Japanese people's confidence in US commitment to the alliance.

In reality, US alliance cooperation for Japan has been functioning better than the way Japanese public has seen and read. For example, information concerning North Korea's nuclear and missile tests gathered by US satellites and surveillance aircraft as well as by the US X-band radar system deployed on the SDF's Shariki Base in northern Japan was indeed indispensable for Tokyo as the Japanese government monitored North Korea's unpredictable conduct. The US deployed more Aegis vessels around Japan than the SDF and also dispatched its most advanced F-22 Raptor fighters to Okinawa.

Regrettably, though, the Japanese mass media's coverage of the military operations on those occasions focused on the SDF's activities, and did not show a clear picture of US–Japan cooperation in practice. Otherwise, these cooperative operations could have worked better to strengthen the Japanese public's confidence in the US commitment to the alliance.

Since the Japanese people's perceptions with regard to the alliance depend much upon what they learn from mass media, the Japanese and US governments should pay more attention in their respective public relations to making it known to the Japanese people that the two countries' forces are operating in close cooperation.

This would be yet another important agenda item for the two countries' strategic consultations, particularly in the year to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Japan–US Security Treaty.